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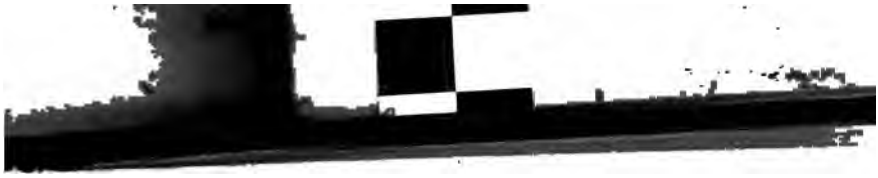

PALLAHMYHL. —*Frontispiece.*

WHEN SHILOH CAME.

BY

AMBROSE LESTER JACKSON.

With Illustrations by the Author.

NEW YORK:
J. S. OGILVIE PUBLISHING COMPANY,
57 ROSE STREET.

TO NEW YORK
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PROLOGUE

ABOVE the green plains of the Valley of Hesydrus, in the ancient land of mystery; above the wide ravines, and the meadows rank with sedge and vines and nodding reeds; above the verdured slopes in the vales of the liquid amber trees, the palms, and the olives; above the lesser hills where the holy cedars stood in their panoply of shade, and where the lime trees and the myrtles spread their odorous branches; above the greater hills, where the frankincense rustled by the balm trees and the cypresses; above the dizzy elevations where the pines and the firs and the junipers held undisputed sway, and the brown moss choked the faltering ivy; above the mighty pinnacles of bare gray rock, and the awful chasms shadowy and still between them; above the apex of the everlasting hills, the frozen minarets of the pallid cliffs, and the icy films that glittered cold and white in the breathless hush of infinity —lo, the snowy crown of Sariphi!

Sariphi, the lord supreme of the Paropamissus, the hoary mountains rolling up in daring aspiration above the clouds; Sariphi, sublimely throned;—and it sat in its glory, beautiful, and proud, and solitary. Where Antares blazed, and where Achernes hung his golden lamp,—alone in the thrilling concave, Sariphi sat silent.

The beginning of the river of Hesydrus was in the heights, beyond the cognisance of men. The inception of its gladness was there;—the gladness of fields where the corn should rustle and the wheat glance in the sunlight;

the gladness of the trees and flowers when they should bloom, and of the birds when they should sing, in the beauty of the arbors. The place was unseen and unknown of men, because it was inaccessible and unreachable; it was high, and near the stars; higher than aught else; above all else.

* * * * * * * * *

The sun arose like a sphere of molten gold, and kissed the virgin snow where it lay nearest heaven; the light of day ran everywhere, but the kisses lingered.

The kisses were the daughters of the sun, and they wove from the frosted snow chaplets of diamonds, and hung them upon the shining heights; out of the snow they wrought necklaces and wreaths of crystal, and strung them, laughing, from the frozen crags to the pallid cliffs beyond,—and plucked them again from the shivering altitudes, and dropped them one by one through the feathery crests to the fathomless drifts below.

The snow was glorified with life; the snow was melted.

The day went down and the still night spread her jeweled tent; the days and the nights were full of balm, and the moon's caresses were not less tender than the sun's loving kisses.

Fallen from their beautiful eyrie where the stars glanced brightest, the dripping crystals of the snow ran wildly hither and thither, wondering, and afraid; they looked beseechingly for rest, but finding none, sank in the abysmal depths and were swallowed up.

Swallowed up, yet not lost; hidden, yet not restrained for aye; in darkness, yet soon to find the light.

The lord Sariphi, the lord of the Paropamissus, laughed, for the wondrous day had dawned in the glory of its beneficence, and the child of the ages was born at last to thread the deserts with a living splendor; the river

of Hesydrus that was to be, had gladdened the desolation by its coming, and the mountains blessed it, and the hills and the valleys waited to receive it with a royal pageantry.

* * * * * * * * *

Under a shelving crag of the towering heights, there was a crevice;—dark, and narrow, and scarce perceptible, —a minute opening, a tiny rift.

Above it, the cloudy mystery of the ice-capped pinnacles receded in a glare of changeless gray, which paled the azure of the sky; and the frozen snow lay white and cold like a chilling shroud upon the mountains. Below it, were gaunt and spectral shapes, peering from the under world and weighted with a solitude which hung upon them like a deadly incubus. No vegetation, coaxed by pleading sunlight, dared to adventure there; no vulture, plumed with audacity, could fly so high; no eagle, spurred by ambition, could reach so far.

A crevice in a gloomy recess, back from the light, remote from the outer face of rocky desolation;—and on a day, a little starry eye, opening with affright and apprehension, peeped a moment from the splintered edge and stared and stared, irresolute. A little note of wonder startled the slumbering air;—and a drop of water, pure as crystal, cold as ice, bright as a star, let itself down from the smooth brow of a pebble and faltered—and sank dismayed into the ground.

But no;—still on the lips of the crevice the wondering little eye—yet no again; it was another starry eye; and there was yet another little note of wonder sounded in the darkness, and another drop of water, crystal-white and limpid, slid unwillingly, or afraid, over the pebble, and hesitated, and was lost.

A grain of sand—a little shower of sand,—came tumbling from the slender rift, and lay a moment by the

pebble. There was a sound so delicate as to seem a cheating fancy; there was a breath—yet hardly so much as a breath,—of movement in the air; and then——

A cluster of drops came through the secret opening with gay impetuosity, and scattered the grains upon the shallow ground, and waited, and were joined anon by others; others followed after them in starry numbers, and the crevice dripped with the jewels of the melted snow which had come wandering down so far through the soundless gloom, and had yet so far to go to reach the light. The cavernous chamber under the shelving crag put off its lethargy to welcome them, and it welcomed them with answering echoes to their merry voices. In a while they had so multiplied in numbers in the unaccustomed space, that some of them were distressed for room, and ventured timidly to go still farther; and went silently; and hesitated often, still in doubt, and filled with a shapeless apprehension. One by one, at first, then joining hands for mutual protection and encouragement, then in laughing numbers, they regained their buoyant spirits and ran to a hollow in the floor of a beetling cliff, and filled it—and were stricken dumb with astonishment.

For they knew not where they were. The beautiful blue sky,—oh, where was the sky they remembered? The white and brilliant snow, the world of snow, the silver spires of ice whereon the moon was wont to hang its chaplets of pearls, and the sun its flashing rainbows,—what had become of them? Oh, where was the snow, so white and fair and precious?—and the glorious sky, the beautiful blue sky,—ah, what had befallen? For the awful mountains climbing from below to a mystery of gray above, presented nothing to their frightened eyes but monstrous forms of barren rock; chasms there were, and terrific fissures choked with inky blackness; cliffs, and

crags, in serried numbers, overhung and stared upon them; upwards, there was naught, for the snow was lost in a vanished sky; below, there was naught, for the bare rocks issued out of chaos.

Their primal glimpse of the under world took their breath away, and robbed them of their gayety.

But not for long. Each drop amongst them all had been vivified by the daughters of the sun; the daughters of the sun,—what would they think if their children lost their hearts and fainted with despair?

And so they overcame their fears, and presently were calm again. They made a floor of silver over the hollow and danced upon it and bubbled to the edges of it and laughed and twinkled and were not a whit afraid. Their numbers gave them confidence and they were merrily exuberant; in the gayety of the dance they were thoughtless, being free from all restraint.

A bevy of restless drops more curious and more venturesome than the rest peered over the brimming edge and looked to see what might be under it;—but shrank again back upon their fellows trembling and white with a nameless dread.

"Fall back, comrades! Fall back, children of the sun! Fall back, lovers of the stars! Oh, why will you press so close! Oh, why do you push,—we are falling! Help! We are falling!—Oh, oh, oh,"—and over the edge of the cliff they went, at first in a close embrace, then ruthlessly torn apart and veiled in their own bewildering spray.

Down from the giddy height of the treacherous cliff, mute with terror, blinded by the swiftness of their fall, plunged the thronging waters shivering in a rain of tears. Down through the gray mists clutching at the formless rocks; down through the sombre glooms of frightful cavities; down, down, through the wind and the shadows;

down through the terrifying space; down—oh, help!—down through the vapors gilded by the sunlight—oh, blessed sun!—down to the labyrinth of rocks and pebbles and crumbling stones which held a myriad hands to catch them;—to another world; to another life; in the foam and the thunder and the brilliant light of unobstructed day.

The wondrous flight was ended. Ended in the bosom of the labyrinth deep and wide, where the brown moss clung like a garment to the stones, and the lichen curled upon the giant walls, crisp, and silver white, and pallid green.

But if their flight were ended, whence came so many others like them, following after? Had they not all come together? Surely, all were here, weeping from afright, and trembling still, though all unharmed. Hark, how they moaned! But no; they were not all, they were only the first; the children of the sun were numberless, and would not be stayed. They came precipitant. In shredded veils of silver when the moon was shining and the stars looked down with sparkling eyes; in threads of flashing jewels when the sun shone goldenly upon them and the breeze entangled them and fanned them mistily. They came to the foaming chalice of the labyrinth and laughed and shouted, recovering quickly from their fears. In a never ending stream they came, from the awful place above,—from the very crag whence the first of them had fallen; from the boundless reaches of the everlasting snow; from the frozen snow upon the ultimate heights; from the spires of the shrouded rocks; from the icy pinnacles, shivering, gaunt, and gray, in the silence of infinity.

And they would always come. Always;—forevermore.

They filled the labyrinth, and overflowed it; they

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place in all this wilderness of rock and mystery where our feet can rest a moment and our eyes find refuge from their apprehension? Is there no level field, no plain, no smooth expanse with room enough to walk with careless feet upon, to dance upon perhaps,—perhaps to dream upon? Oh, monstrous rocks! We are confused with fear,—we tremble,—we faint,——

Ah, what is that?—that wondrous color,—yonder?

A dream-cloud, resting on the greater hills beyond; a boundless contiguity of green and olive, shadowing all the hills and reaching down through purple mists to viewless depths!—a revelation, new, and strange, and beautiful;—what could it be?

It was the pines!—the fadeless pines and cedars, thronging at the limit of their region; thronging in their majesty wherever the eye might turn!

The pines! The glorious trees,—the highmost trees upon the mountains!

Wonderful!

Another leap down the foaming cataracts, and another bound from the shining ledges; and the jubilant waters streamed afar upon the golden sands of the upper valleys, and became indeed a river.

It was the River of Hesydrus. At last, at last, the beautiful river, beautiful and bright between the mountains!

Thenceforward, the most charming way was the right way. The river swept with chiming cymbals to the outer courts of the junipers; to the rocky reaches sentineled with firs; to the inner courts where the pine trees stood in their majesty, grand, proud, and magnificent. The air was spicy with the balm of the evergreens, and the density of shade was made less gloomy by the frequent visits of the sunlight glancing brilliantly down wherever the

branches would permit. The river glided through the splendid aisles with music;—oh, how beautiful, how beautiful, was this shadowy wilderness of green!

It was a wilderness, indeed, and the time came when it seemed to be interminable.

* * * * * * * * *

Again, from the crest of a mighty precipice, the river leaped in a blaze of glory. From the intimate forests dim with shadows; from the myriad arches of the columned pines and from the aisles of the hemlocks and the cedars; from the ranks of the firs in their panoply of olive; from the moss-grown ledges and the lichened stones where the ferns were crisping; from the greater hills; from the highmost trees upon the mountains;—came the river, crystalline, and deep, and wide, and leaped in a glorious tempest of mist and rain and music over the thrilling wall.

Leaped to the welcoming arms of its own peculiar vale; to the sumptuous heritage prepared for it at the beginning; to the ineffable glories of its kingdom.

From the crash of the falling floods,—from the foam wreaths and the blinding spray,—the river glided on to halcyon peace in undisputed sovereignty; its progress was a pageant; its scope and influence were limitless.

The treasure-chambers opened wide upon the green banks, and the vales were lavish with their tribute. Transcendent loveliness and infinite variety, were visible everywhere under the gracious sky of tenderest azure. The trees were grand in their raiment of shining foliage, and the flowers vied with them in the charming scenes which followed one upon another. From the trees of the morning to the beeches and the olives, every glade was plumed and tufted high with blossoms; from the oak trees to the almugs, every dell was radiant with flowers.

From the palms and the cinnamons, to the frankincense and plane trees; from the cedars and the almonds, to the cloves, and the coral trees; from the balsams to the pomegranates,—the meadows laughed with flowers.

And the vines were beautiful. Beautiful and endless, netting the boughs with jewel-like and fragrant blooms, large-leaved and many-tendriled, wreathing the arbors close, and drooping down from aerial heights of verdure to the rippling music and the whirling wavelets of the glancing river.

But the flowers;—the flowers were glorious.

From the shy andromedas, to the gorgeous orchids flaming in the deeps, was but a span; from the lilies mantling grassy fields, and the lilies glowing on the watery inlets, to the honeysuckle garlanding the moss-grown ledges, was only an arm's reach. And it was so, from the henna trees to the lotus cups; from the oleanders to the snow-fans; from the gold trees to the roses; from the fringed peacocks' crests to the white violets; from the mallows to the rhododendrons; from the jasmin to the laurels; from the garnet-weeds to the eglantines; from the poppies and the trumpet-quivers to the flame drops and the bramble cups; from the tassel flowers and the forget-me-nots, to the grass bells, and the tiniest floret riding on a filament of silk and hardly knowing whence it came or what it was.

In the shady arbors of the camphor trees, were white doves sitting in pensive numbers like tulips of ivory upon sprays of amethyst; but in the sunlight, flashed the humming birds and the birds of paradise, the pheasants, and the parrots, the sun-birds, and the butterflies. The butterflies were marvelously beautiful; so fair, indeed, that it seemed as though the very flowers had taken wing and were roving emulously through every mead and valley.

WHEN SHILOH CAME

CHAPTER I

MIDWAY between the region of solitude and boundless shade, and that of the fairy land of flowers and sunlight, the limpid waters made a vast sweep through a complex wilderness of gigantic rocks, and took from thence their last plunge in a series of foaming rapids, to glide thenceforward in unobstructed and bright tranquility. The rapids were like a flight of silver stairs, down which a multitude of laughing children all in white, were scampering in a joyous frolic; and at their feet, there was a green and widely spreading meadow.

The meadow sloped upwards from the river's brink, in some places fringed with the loveliest trees, and in others losing its individuality by degrees amongst a wild entanglement of rocks and multi-flowered vines; but at a certain place farthest away from the river's edge, it was bounded by a narrow road which led in a devious and undulating course from the golden slopes of the mountains to the open plain below, and to a wonderful city there, more than forty leagues away.

In the midst of the green meadow, there stood a house of fair dimensions, and with many angles, under the sheltering branches of a great tree. Its simplicity was marked, and the ensemble it presented was beautiful. The walls were built of unhewn stones, each one of which

had been chosen for some distinctive quality of its own, either of shape, color, or brilliancy; and as the material composing them was chiefly a crystalline variety of quartz,- a cream-white, or lightly tinted chalcedony,—the effect which they produced against the background of magnificent foliage was quite a magical one.

In its construction, the house was a marvel of the builder's genius, for every stone had been so placed as to show outwardly its natural surface, with all the bright and curious variations peculiar to it; and since there were many projections of the wall along its several sides, forming a number of shallow recesses therein, the glint and sparkle of the stones were all the more striking from the semi-shadows falling across them. The roof consisted of several broad slabs of a greenish and slate-like stone so disposed as to overhang the walls for a space of several feet; and in the middle of the front wall, facing the river, was a porch consisting of four massive pillars of white chalcedony, square, unpolished, and without capitals or bases. There were no windows, neither were there any openings in the walls other than that of the doorway under the porch; but diametrically opposite the latter, at what might be called the rear of the house, a kind of extension reached out for a considerable distance, and was terminated near that part of the demesne where the road lay, by a wide-arched gate.

The interior of the building was simply an inclosed space, open to the sky; but in the centre of the space there stood a gigantic deodar, spreading high and wide in canopies and pavilions of the richest foliage, and serving excellently to shield the place from meridian heats, and from the rains in their season. Around the inner sides of the walls,—the house being something of a heptagon in its general plan,—there was a lower tier of spacious cham-

bers, opening upon the court, and an upper tier of the same number, reaching to the roof of stone slabs. These were separated one from another by permanent screens of braided bamboo and silk-grass, and were provided each with a latticed balcony and an awning, or tent-like drapery, of gayly tinted cloth. Access to the upper tier was had by means of a staircase at one side of the court, which led up to a narrow passage sweeping around and in front of the whole series of rooms; the latter being entered from it through openings in their several balconies, and the outer edge of the passage being protected by a continuous low railing of bamboo, wrought in beautiful designs. Around the base of the grand cedar tree in the centre of the court, was built a carved basin of red porphyry, raised about three feet from the ground, and brimming over with a constant flow of pure cold water; the water was brought to that outlet through pipes laid under ground from one of the springs beyond the meadow, and its overflow was similarly conducted away, to the river below. The ample space of the court was paved with smooth blocks of red porphyry, and, at regular intervals around its circumference, stood seven vases of the same beautiful stone, each vase fronting an upper and a lower chamber, and containing small palm trees and ivy.

Before the house, without, the grass of the meadow was clipped to a velvet-like texture, and the wide semi-circle of its general shape was hedged about by a thick wall of juniper trees a dozen or more feet in height; these were so cunningly pruned and trimmed that they presented toward the house an aspect exactly resembling that of an endless smoothly hanging curtain of the richest olive hue.

In the middle of the lawn, fronting the portico, was an altar. This was formed of a highly polished shaft of

red porphyry superimposed upon a cube of rough gray marble, the whole being a little less than six feet high; and on the top of the shaft, there was an image in a sitting posture, carved out of metal and heavily gilded, representing one of the multitudinous gods of the time and place.

On the edge of the river, there was a narrow opening in the juniper hedge, protected by a double gate of fancifully wrought bamboo, and giving access to a broad stone platform reaching out into the water and harboring at its sides a delicious clustering of reeds, and water bushes, vines, lilies, and lotuses.

There were several other buildings, beyond the meadow, and on the roadside, belonging to this elegant abode; but they were invisible from almost every point, being hidden partly by design and partly by the irrepressible vegetation which covered everything in veiling leaves and flowers; the natural quarries from whence the precious materials constituting the house were derived, lay still farther away, nestling in a prodigious chasm of the adjacent heights.

The place and its environs was known as the House of Hepsai.

Hepsai was one of the minor lords of the provinces, ruling over that of Hesydrus, which included the region lying between the upper slopes of the Paropamissus and the rose gardens of Prophthasia, the imperial city standing on both sides of the river nearly fifty leagues to the south. He was a man of venerable years, and of imposing presence; the father of six stalwart sons, and three fair daughters; the arbiter in all questions arising within a radius of twenty leagues from his abode, and the ultimate judge in all cases of dispute touching rights of domain; the receiver of taxes, and general administrator.

He was therefore a man of considerable importance, yet the weight of his responsibility was a slight one in comparison with that of the greater lords; for whereas they were compelled by the supreme authority to render strict accounts from a dozen provinces, he had the felicity of guarding the welfare of but one, and his contribution was simplified to that extent.

The economy of his household was a happy one. His wife, Thryahl, in accordance with the custom of the country and period, occupied a place of passive dignity only a degree below his own, but was precluded from the slightest administration of affairs, on account of the peculiar veneration in which her position was held. His sons and daughters were provided with occupations suitable to their sphere, his servants were obedient and faithful, his storehouses were abundantly filled, his cattle grazed in the richest pastures of the upper hills, and his farm lands yielded a generous revenue. He was old, but the years had touched him lightly, his vigor was unimpaired, and his relish for the things of the hour was still keen, though measurably chastened.

Above all other advantages, however, and beyond the flawless satisfaction which so pleasant and stable an environment assured to his years and dignity, he conceived the greatest to be the possession of his children.

He regarded them with a never failing sense of happiness; he watched their development with an interest and solicitude which few parents vouchsafe, and since he never condoned a fault, or neglected to praise a virtue, his reward was great, and the love which bound them all together was marked by a sense of mutual respect and confidence, unassailable and enduring.

The sons and daughters were bachelors and maids.

Shoza was the eldest; he was a cataphract in the army

of the king, and had the privilege of revisiting his father's house once in every six months, and of remaining there in the midst of its joys twelve days at each period.

Phyloprase, the eldest daughter, came next; she was the ruler over domestic affairs, having full authority in everything pertaining to the inner household, and guiding all its details according to her pleasure;—a chatelaine, to whom a numerous company of slaves rendered steadfast and alert obedience.

Then came Mithreb, the second of the sons, who was a priest in the mystic under-temple of Alpleh, god of the mountains, which was situated on the river's bank a league away; he was accustomed to visit his father's house once in every forty days, but his visits were always brief, because of the exacting nature of his function.

The next in order was Movis, the third son, who was his father's steward; he directed the labors in the fields, and administered the estate in all its branches, receiving all monies, and paying all obligations; he rendered his accounts every ten days to his father, and once every year to the greater lord who was suzerain over that, as well as over a number of adjoining provinces.

Balan was next; he was a physician, and practiced the sacred art of healing both in his home province and in a part of one of the others.

Then Shalzamene; she was a musician, and played before the altars in the groves, at the oft recurring periods of worship and festivity; she was skilled in writing, also, and composed many couplets of verse, both for reciting, and singing; and compounded all the incense burned in the great temple of her father's domain.

Ahmad came next; he was a prosperous silk merchant in one of the farther provinces; he dealt in all textile wares, from simple snow white cotton to the most mag-

nificent and costly silks and cloths threaded with gold and silver, and exquisite lace of a kind unknown to the people of any other country. He was held in high repute, but since his calling necessitated an extraordinary amount of personal attention, his visits to the homestead were restricted to two or three, at uncertain intervals, in the course of a year.

Then came Carmyhl, the youngest son; whose chief attribute consisted in a charming disinclination for any one pursuit, and a passionate zest for many. He was proficient in athletic feats, a daring hunter in the interminable dark woods of the higher mountains, an accomplished musician, and a gifted artist whose works adorned the penetralia of numerous temples. Nevertheless, Carmyhl was more of a dreamer than anything else, and resembled one who unconsciously waits for the opportunity of his existence.

Last of all, was Dahlymel, the youngest daughter; a vestal, serving the altar of the home god, and that of Alpleh. By reason of her supreme devotion, and in consideration of her father's exalted position, she had the privilege of unrestraint; and excepting when attending to the sacred fires in the temple, spent the days in her father's house;—the temple was but a league removed from thence.

The House of Hepsai was therefore an abode of bliss. Every member of the family was pleasant to look upon, and some of them were endowed with extraordinary qualities of beauty. They possessed the fair complexions of the mountain tribes in a greater degree of purity than was seen in the lower provinces, though indeed, all the people of that part of the ancient land of mystery were descended from Caucasian progenitors; and in addition, they had the subtle charm derived from long dwelling of

their ancestors in a region of almost tropical luxury. Hepsai himself, was a grand figure, bearded and crowned with snow white locks, impressive and awe-inspiring. Shoza, the soldier, was like one of his own gods of war, tall, broad, and sinewy; Mithreb, the priest, was also tall, but slender, and lithe; Movis, the steward, was of greater bulk than the others, but of the same height; Balan, the physician, was slender like his brother the priest, and much resembled him; Ahmad, the merchant, black bearded and splendid of presence, was also tall, and so was Carmyhl, the unstable of purpose, the dreamer, and butterfly.

The sisters were no whit behind these, in the attractiveness of their persons. Phyloprase the chatelaine, was almost as tall as her brothers, and her beauty was queen-like, though grave. Shalzamene, the poet, was of lesser stature, and was gifted with charming beauty. Dahlymel, the vestal, was the slightest in figure of all and was pure and lovely to look upon as a lotus flower;—Dahlymel was the loveliest virgin in all the mountains.

CHAPTER II

THE Festival of Propitiation, which fell upon a certain day in the springtime of the year, had a double importance, in that, in addition to its more particular significance of a time of thanks-offering to the family gods, its advent marked the attainment to his majority of Carmyhl, the youngest son of the House of Hepsai. He was now twenty-six years of age, and all his kindred were assembled to do honor to the occasion.

The day was beautiful, and the preparations for it had been elaborate.

The sparkling white walls of the house were richly festooned with interwoven branches of ivy and juniper, from which depended at regular intervals fair large wreaths of flowers; over the arch of the portico several immense palm leaves were gracefully arranged, and the pillars were twined with roses. On the lawn, which extended widely in every direction like an immense carpet of green velvet, a number of gilded poles had been erected, from the tops of which spread out silken awnings of various gay colors; these not only gave a fairy-like picturesqueness to the scene, but intercepted the too-fervent rays of the sun, and tinged the atmosphere below them with an iridescent glow; a soft breeze came up from the river, and the perfume of the flowers was perceptible everywhere.

The altar in front of the porch was heavily draped with white cloth, around which was fastened a cord of scarlet honeysuckle, and against which there leaned a willow wand. A shallow metal dish rested on the top of the

altar, just in front of the idol which was seated there; and in the dish, fed from some highly concentrated substance which it contained, a broad flame of fire was continually dancing up and down.

There were numbers of seats scattered around in different places; some were mere rugs, thick and plush-like in texture, and gorgeous in design and color; others were veritable beds of gilded bamboo, and still others were sofas of the same elegant material, some of them fashioned like divans, and some like chairs, over which were carelessly thrown the splendid skins of wild beasts slain by the youthful cause of all these preparations.

A sumptuous feast was provided in various parts of the meadow, the chief ingredients of which were fruits, both of the familiar and of the rarer kinds, and all of them provokingly delicious. There was wine, also, in agate jars, the cups belonging to which were of wrought crystal; and in every place,—in all places, indeed,—roses and lilies and all full blossomed flowers abounded.

There was a large company present, men, women, and children, in gay attire, and in a merry mood as the hour approached the meridian.

Hepsai and Thryahl were throned on a splendid divan as befitted their signal importance, and as they glanced over the scene they exchanged looks of profound satisfaction, and gave each to the other an eloquent pressure of the hand. For all were there; from the imposing figure of the glittering cataphract, to the white robed and spirit-like vestal, all the sons and daughters of the house were there, mingling freely with the guests, and joining with them in lively conversation and frequent laughter. Their coming together all at the same time, was a thing which seldom happened, and was seldom possible.

The earlier hours of the morning passed swiftly away.

When the meridian was come, there was a sudden and prolonged ringing of myriads of tiny silver bells, the bird-like music of which appeared to issue from within the house; and at the evident signal, Dahlymel hastened to the altar, and taking a small object fashioned like a lotus bud from her girdle, placed it in the middle of the flaming dish.

Instantly, a great volume of smoke rose up from thence, obscuring the light for a brief while, and giving forth an odor resembling that of crushed arborvitae leaves. The company, without exception, prostrated themselves on the ground, with their heads toward the altar. Utter silence reigned for a full minute; and then the vestal, standing like some ethereal visitant before the idol, addressed it in a clear, soft voice:

"Thou loving god of our father's house,—Isyl,—hear us! Son of Alpleh of the mountains,—Isyl,—hear us! Arbiter of all our days,—Isyl,—hear us! . . . We have not forgotten thee, nor mistrusted thee, nor neglected thee. We love thee, we hope in thee, we wait upon thy pleasure. Give us our meed when we ask in the temple; keep evil from us; feed us, and help us. . . . Son of Alpleh of the mountains,—Isyl,—help us! Arbiter of our days,—Isyl,—help us!"

The prayer ended, all arose to their feet and resumed their former attitudes and gay conversation. The idol seemed to frown upon them through the veiling incense, but the sunshine falling on its gilded horns dazzled their eyes.

A procession of children now issued forth from the portico, coming two by two, each carrying a wreath of flowers in one hand and holding to a long rope of blossoms with the other; their ages ranged from four to six years, and they were naked with the exception of wearing

cinctures of white cloth about their loins; they resembled the petals of tea-roses threaded upon a cord of apple blossoms. They laughed, and shook their heads, and formed a ring around the altar.

Hepsai and Thryahl then descended from their throne, and advancing to the porch of the house, stood there, observant; the children danced with all the charming abandon of their years, first in one direction half way around the altar, and then back again for almost an equal distance, all the while laughing and shouting one to another. The fair vestal took the willow wand in her hand, and waving it to and fro slowly, guided their movements so perfectly that the figure which it was sought to render in that pretty fashion was soon completed.

The figure was a kind of progressive zone; at each tumultuous movement of the children in one direction, they would overstep the previous limit by a yard or so, then dance backward, and then forward again; and this maneuvre was kept up, like the ebb and flow of a tide, until they had accomplished the full circle around the altar, making in all twenty-six advances.

At the twenty-sixth advance, which finished the figure, and so typified the completed circle of Carmyhl's twenty-six years, a strain of instrumental music issued from the house, and the young men of the assembly took up the theme of it and sang a number of verses with striking effect. While they were singing, the vestal took one end of the rope of blossoms, and fastened it to the white cloth draping the altar; the children having relinquished their grasp upon the rope, had only the wreaths left in their hands, and with these, they linked themselves together in a flowery circle all about the altar.

The vestal then made a sign with her outstretched arms, whereupon Carmyhl advanced from the portal

where he had been standing in readiness with his parents, and, leaping over the gay barrier with a laugh, approached the altar and stood close against it. At once, every sound was hushed, and the numerous guests stood silently watching the consummation of the, to them, familiar rite.

It was an ancient custom, even in that ancient time, and hinged upon the presumed six stages in the life of a man. From his birth to his fifth year, the period was called the age of the kitten because of its engaging innocence, and the wonderment excited in its course by the phases of a new existence. From the fifth year to the sixteenth, was the age of the monkey, because of its irresponsibility, its wantonness, and its mischievous propensities. The period between the sixteenth and the twenty-sixth years, was the ass's age, so stigmatised on account of the stubbornness of its conceit, its self-esteem, its superciliousness and general contrariness. From twenty-six to sixty was the age of the lion, the veritable and complete age of manhood; for during that period the faculties were ripe and fully equipped for serious action, the mental and physical powers were alert, and the audacity which knew no flagging, spurred the thoughts to boldness and the hands to daring achievement. From sixty to seventy, it was the age of the philosopher, typified by the owl; for then, the vanity of all things, and their mutability, were perceived clearly, and freely acknowledged. And finally, that time which stretched from the seventieth year to the end of existence, was the age of the turtle; for then, it was the time of withdrawal from activities, and the final lethargy of waiting.

The scene was quite impressive at the moment, from the absolute silence maintained, and the seeming dumb artificiality of all the persons assembled there, even in-

cluding the children. The smoke of the incense rose up idly in thin spirals, and that was the only movement discernible within the wide inclosure.

Then Dahlymel took up the strand of blossoms, and walked with it round and round the altar, binding as she went the figure of her younger brother against the white cloth which hung from the idol downwards; and as she did so, the guests sang in unison a song whose burden was partly of farewell and partly of welcome, and when the end of the strand was reached, Carmyhl found himself bound fast with a living cord.

The vestal then reached up over his head as high as she could, and broke the willow wand in the middle, at the same time invoking the brazen image glinting in the roseate light:

"Protecting god of our father's house,—Isyl,—hear us! Son of Alpleh of the mountains,—Isyl,—hear us! Forgive the follies of the past, and remember them not against us. The past is broken,—the past we throw from us,—thus;" and here she threw the pieces of the wand far from her;—"our hands are empty," she continued, "and we implore thee to fill them with victories. Son of Alpleh of the mountains,—Isyl,—hear us! Arbiter of our days,—Isyl,—help us!"

Then Hepsai, leaving his wife in the porch, came hastily forward, and drawing a short curved sword from his girdle, gave it into his son's hands. Carmyhl, on receiving it, at once cut the withes which bound him, and knelt at his father's feet; who stretched out his arms over his head, and blessed him, and caused him to rise again.

Immediately, all was life and animation, and congratulations were offered effusively and noisily; while the band of musicians which had hitherto remained in the court of the house, came out from thence, and played a joyous

medley of airs. The younger portion of the company responded to the invitation of the music by joining hands and dancing all about the lawn. Then the children scampered through the porch to the inner court, where they were dressed, and presented with many pretty gifts commemorative of the occasion; the sisters of Carmyhl came to him and kissed his forehead; his brothers took his hands and in turn pressed them against their hearts.

The ceremony was finished.

"It was a hopeless task," said Carmyhl, laughing, and addressing his elder brother, "to try to impress you with becoming awe by the braying of an ass; but now, beware! the note is changed, and I can roar as any lion."

"And yet," responded Shoza, smiling, "you were a monkey once."

"'Tis true," said Carmyhl; "but the little wretch is dead,—sacrificed on the altar of the temple."

"The ass is dead, also," said Mithreb; "and by this time the smoke of its roasting should be seen from the vantage of the house-top."

"Brother Carmyhl makes but an indifferent lion," observed Balan, joining the group; "and something more than a mere rite is necessary to convince us of his bold pretentions. It is required of him to prove himself worthy of that distinction before two days have flown, but I fear we shall look in vain for any positive signs of ferociousness. What shall you do, brother?"

"Set me a lion's task," answered Carmyhl, "and before the two days have passed, I will do it."

"There is a villainous prowling tiger in the jungle field below," said Movis, suggestively; "one would think that a tap from a lion's paw might serve to rid us of it."

"Good! I'll nail his hide on the outer door before to-morrow night."

"I know of a nobler deed by which to test a lion's courage," said Ahmad, the merchant; "the robbers on the plain are rife; they are inspired and led by a consummate villain who calls himself the White Vulture. *White Vulture, indeed!*—bring us his head, Carmyhl."

"Show me his lair," replied the new lion, "and I will bring his whole body to the king's dungeon."

But to this task, objection was made.

"Dear brothers," said Phyloprase, who, with her sister Shalzamene, now approached; "why will you tempt a novice to his own destruction? Why set such difficult tasks, when you know that neither of them can possibly be accomplished in so brief a while?—Carmyhl, do not for a moment consider them."

"But I am bound to prove myself," said Carmyhl.

"Then let me set you a task more suitable for a first adventure. You shall mount your horse at sunset and ride into the hollows of the fir wood as far as to the Black Cavern; you will remain there, with your sword drawn, until it is midnight, and return to us in the early morning. And so we shall know that you are a lion indeed."

"Dear sister," responded Carmyhl, "you forget that I am familiar with the place, and that its reputed terrors only provoke scorn in my bosom, and laughter on my lips."

"Nevertheless," she said, "no man has adventured safely there, as yet, and it is only because of my abounding confidence in your stoutness of heart, that I would send my brother. The qualities to be displayed, are courage, boldness, and fortitude."

"Against what evils, Phyloprase?"

But to that question she had no ready answer.

"I do not know," she said.

"You send our brother on a dubious path," said Shalzamene, "and one too far away. I should grieve, I know, until his return. Let me set the task, then.—Fetch me a young fawn, Carmyhl, and a wreath of blossoms from the almug tree."

"But, Shalzamene," he objected gayly, "that is no task, for a lion,—if I were still a monkey,—"

Here Shoza interrupted arbitrarily:

"Let us have a wrestling-match," he said; "it will serve to try his strength, which, after all, is the chiefest attribute of a lion." Then raising his voice and turning to the guests who were scattered in different places over the lawn,—"Here, Doma!" he called; "Ghazet! Sept! Plahro!—come and give this youngster a fall." Half a dozen young men came bounding over the grass in eager response to this invitation, but much to their surprise and dismay, and greatly to the amusement of the brothers and the unbounded delight of every one near enough to enjoy the frolic, Carmyhl flew to meet them with a suddenness and agility which were almost phenomenal.

Before the too-ready champions could realise what was happening, and before, indeed, they could recover themselves sufficiently to make the least preparation, Carmyhl had seized them one after the other and laid them flat upon their backs.

The spectators clapped their hands and applauded, with much laughter; the young men in the grass smiled, and remained inert where they had been thrown.

"Was that a fair throw, Carmyhl?" asked one of them, with something like a reproachful look.

"Imagine a young heifer putting that question to a lion," answered Carmyhl, laughing; "the lion never hesitates in the interests of formality, or in those of politeness:

he achieves his end at once, and meditates afterward. *I am a lion.*"

"You shall prove it indubitably, to-morrow," said Movis, "by fetching me the hide of that tiger before he gorges down another sheep."

"No, no!" cried Shalzamene, imploringly; "that is too dangerous a task to accomplish all alone.—A young fawn, Carmyhl,—only a little fawn,—and the almug blossoms."

"Let his majesty choose for himself," Balan interposed; "it ought to be an easy matter to decide, for we have given him five tasks to select from, including this ridiculous wrestling-match."

Carmyhl put his hand to his forehead in perplexity, for he wished to please his brothers and yet not to displease his sisters. Then happening to glance toward the fallen athletes who still maintained their prone attitudes in the grass with great good humor,—it being the ethics of the case that they were not to rise until graciously bidden to do so by their vanquisher,—the expression of his face changed, and he laughed.

"Plahro, Ghazet, Sept," he said, going near them,—"Doma, Sarab,—why! there are five of you, and you shall resolve my doubts. Rise, friends,—and forgive the mean advantage I took of your noble eagerness."

The young men sprang to their feet, protesting that they had received their abasement fairly;—all but Sept; who, being deeply enamoured with one of the beautiful girls who had witnessed his downfall, and who had laughed immoderately over it, was so much chagrined that he could not force a smile.

Carmyhl took a little book of writing leaves from his bosom, and marking a different number on each of them with the sharp instrument attached to the cover, tore them

out, and fastened one to the sleeve of each of the mystified would-be wrestlers.

"Phyloprase," he said, addressing his elder sister, "I beg that you will blindfold me with that pretty scarf you wear; and come with me aside, a little distance."

When his sister had complied with his request, guessing his motive at once, she called the slaves to clear the meadow of most of its incumbrances, and then led him to the middle space, and retired.

"Dear friends," he said, "the merest chance shall decide the nature of the task I am to undertake. When I call out, you must all disperse,—but not too far away,—and I will try to grasp my fate. If I should follow other than these five, you shall tell me at once; but if I chance upon one of them, let there be silence."

He paused a moment, to give them leisure for disposing themselves to the best advantage; then cried out:

"In the name of Isyl,—away!"

Then ensued a frolic indeed. The men quickly separated, and the girls and women fled towards the altar, and the porch of the house, the first urging the young lion in different directions, and the others laughing and overturning the scattered seats in their flight. The elder guests grouped themselves together out of harm's way, and vastly enjoyed the sport; while Hepsai and Thryahl resumed their former throne-like couch, and watched the progress of affairs with repressed delight.

Carmyhl stood awhile as if listening for some particular sound, then darted suddenly to one side with his hands outstretched,—and missed his brother Ahmad by half a yard; and the latter called out his name, as required.

After another brief pause, Carmyhl made another essay, but in a more cautious way; he moved slowly, first in one direction, and then in another, keeping his ears alert for

the slightest indication of a near presence. In this way, he pounced upon half a dozen of the unwary, but since in each case it proved to be a false capture,—as he was made to understand by hearing their names called out,—he changed his method and began to run swiftly about in such eccentric and surprising ways that the air was filled with the shouts and laughter of the fugitives.

Twice or thrice he seized upon some mischievous girl whose desire to coquette with danger was greater than her ability to escape from it, but in each case the gallant youth went on his knees and besought pardon, kissing the pretty hand of his fair prisoner.

In a little while he stopped to ponder a moment on the situation; the lawn was extensive, and he believed that he had thoroughly swept the middle of it. He was on the point of making his way to the farther extremity, when something indefinable told him he was not alone.

Instantly, he sprang forward,—and was caught in the grip of two powerful hands, which checked his career and held him as in a vice of steel.

He could neither release himself, or even make a struggle. He was caught, but there was no harshness in the touch of his captor. He was caught by the forearms, and his hands were free;—he bent his fingers over, and felt the unyielding hardness of metal. His countenance cleared.

"Dear brother," he said, laughing, "it is magnificent to be restrained by hands of such wondrous power, and I yield gladly."

"I thank you for that consideration," responded Shoza, smiling, and looking with pride on the athletic elegance of his captive; "for you tried my strength with a fine thrill, and I am proud of our young lion. I wished but to feel the temper of your muscles when they were lightly

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strung;—if you were angry with your adversary, his would be the woe, and yours the triumph."

During this brief interchange of brotherly compliment, a fatal curiosity had incited the heretofore too-agile youths with numbered sleeves to draw so perilously near, that Shoza relinquished his grasp on his brother's arms, and, with a warning pressure of his finger, retired.

Carmyhl took a step forward with much dissembling caution,—then another,—and another; when, turning about abruptly, he sped like an arrow upon a cunningly suspected victim.

He caught the fleeing Sept in full career, and the shock of their coming together was so great that both of them went over headlong on the grass, carrying with them one of the numerous dainty tables which had inadvertently been overlooked by the slaves when they were clearing the lawn for action. A tumultuous shout went up, and there was a great clapping of hands over the victory.

In this instance, again, it was observed that Sept took his overthrow with a very bad grace; but when the unfortunate youth perceived with what unrestrained merriment his sweetheart regarded his capture by the lion of the day, he darted one malignant glance toward Carmyhl, and then, with a strong effort, forced himself into a semblance of amiability;—his revenge should come at another time.

Carmyhl, meanwhile, was leading him by the sleeve to the place where Hepsai and Thryahl were seated, and having arrived there, presented him laughingly as the arbiter of his fate.

"Honored parents," he said, "in deference to the wishes of my brothers and sisters, as well as in accordance with the usual custom, it is my purpose to make some little proof of the courage which is inherent in the callow lion.

Out of five different tasks which have been set before me, I could not find it in my heart to prefer one before another, because I would not slight the wish of any. Therefore I marked five numbers on the sleeves of these gracious friends, intending to choose that task the bearer of whose number I should capture first. See: on the sleeve of Sept,—Sept, you look unhahppy!—here is the number *three*. 'Tis the number of Phyloprase."

"And what is the task, Carmyhl?" asked his father.

"Oh, a dreamer's task;—to ride to the Black Cavern, and to remain there until midnight, while the leopards dance and the owls hoot. 'Twill be a tedious one, but the gods have willed it."

"Oh, Carmyhl!" said his mother, with a troubled look; "do not regard it so lightly, for it is a terrible place by night, and bears the reputation of harboring evil spirits."

"All the better!" he responded gayly; "I have long wished to see one. And if I see one, I will bring a bristle of its mane, or a feather of its wing, or a scale from its hide, to burn upon the altar."

"See!" exclaimed Shalzamene, suddenly, pointing toward the gilded image, from whose pedestal the white cloth had been removed; "Dahlymel invokes protection for our brother."

The vestal had placed another seeming lotus bud in the flaming dish on the altar, and a great smoke of incense curled upward and spread abroad in the air.

As the scent of arborvitae became perceptible, the whole assembly prostrated themselves.

"Thou loving god of the House of Hepsai," said the vestal, "be with us! Son of Alpleh of the mountains,—Isyl,—hear us! With the arms of thy power, shield thy charge;—with the lightning of thine eyes, protect him;—with thy guiding hand, lead him back safely to the haven

of our hearts. Isyl! Son of Alpleh of the mountains, hear us!—hear us!"

The pleasures of the day went forward to the setting of the sun.

At sunset, Carmyhl rode away.

CHAPTER III

THE next morning at daybreak, Dahlymel came out from her chamber to the little balcony in front of it, and resting her hands on the slender rail gazed meditatively at the fountain in the middle of the court; the great branches of the holy cedar spreading above caused a green twilight to pervade, and wrapped all things in a dewy mystery.

She looked ethereally lovely in her delicate white robe, whose gauzy folds hanging loose from her neck to her pretty sandaled feet were scarce profuse enough to hide the exquisite contours of her figure. Her dark hair flowed freely down almost to the ground, being hindered here and there by the wantonness of its own silken floss; her complexion was like ivory faintly tinged with eglantine; her lips were like the crimson petals of a half opened rose; her eyes were black, soft, and humid, like over-ripe grapes.

She sighed; and looking away from the fountain, gazed wistfully and long at the archway through which communication was had with the adjacent buildings; she was watching for Carmyhl's return from his vigil in the forest.

The scene of that vigil had been present in her sensitive mind all the night through, teeming with preternatural horrors, and robbing her of sleep. But soon the crisp air of the morning reminded her that Carmyhl's return was not to be expected before the sunrise, and reflecting that there was still some time to elapse before that happy period, she returned slowly to her chamber.

From thence she presently reappeared, wearing a long

mantle of rose-colored cloth, which was so fashioned as to cover her completely, with the exception of a space left open for her eyes to see through; there were sleeves attached to it, and thus her arms and hands were free. Her sandaled feet were inclosed in little shoes of fur.

She left the balcony, and descending the steps which led to the court below, approached the fountain. The water was bubbling up and plashing with a musical sound as it slipped over the rim of the polished basin. She clapped her hands softly, and called:

"Hyla! Hyla!"

Immediately, a beautiful leopard came bounding towards her from a shallow niche in the wall, where it had passed the night;—beautiful in the grace and suppleness of its form, and in the velvet richness of its spotted coat; but magnificent in its hidden strength, and terrible in the capabilities of its wrath.

It came to her side with all the playful gambols of the merest kitten, and fawned at her feet with signs of unmistakable affection. At a word from her it looked up, and she placed one hand caressingly on its head; it stood almost as high as her waist.

She gave it to drink in the drip of the fountain, and then fastening one end of an exceedingly slender chain to the silver collar around its neck, led it away to the arch, and through the arch to the open space beyond. Here she paused a while, gazing steadfastly along the broad road which wound through the fields and gardens to the distant woods. There was no one to be seen, however; the young lion was strangely delayed. She gave a little sigh of disappointment, and then unwillingly resumed her way through the great gate, which she easily opened.

Dahlymel ministered in the temple every morning, and

her presence with the other vestals could in no wise be dispensed with.

Hyla was the vestal's protector; and had been trained severely from the moment of its birth, to that gracious duty. The chain by which it was led so easily and so willingly, was hardly stronger than a thread,—a strand of silk,—and yet it served. To the brute's obedience, it was as a giant fetter, unbreakable, and restraining.

By degrees, the veiling shrubs, the green branches, and the dew-bright flowers, closed the long vista of the path they followed, and ultimately hid them in the shadow of the way. The morning thrush began to sing in the coppice; the softest zephyr dipped from the slopes of the mountains. In a moment, the sky was flushed with rose, and the day was come indeed.

Meanwhile, an unusual commotion was manifest in the House of Hepsai, with the sun's rising. Slaves were sent out in different directions to scan the prospect, and their slow return without tidings of any kind added dismay to the growing anxiety. Finally, Shoza called for his horse, and mounted him with the purpose of making a more extended search.

"Restrain your fears, brothers and sisters," he said; "and if possible, keep the knowledge of our uneasiness from our parents, who will not come forth for yet some hours. By that time I hope to be back again with our venturesome lion, if he has not gone in search of Movis' tiger of the jungle, meaning to add lustre to the tameness of his first venture. Mithreb, I pray you return to the temple at once, for it may be that Carmyhl has gone aside to visit it on his return. Balan, be ready, lest some accident has befallen. Ahmad, wait for me, and we will go to the city together, for my limit of absence will be reached at sunset, and the king's will is not to be overstrained."

"Where will you ride, brother?" asked Mithreb.

"To the Black Cavern," answered Shoza; "and from thence I will bring you happy tidings."

Shoza needed no preparation for adventure.

It was not permitted for a soldier of the highest branch of the king's arms to lay aside his armor for even a holiday visit to his own home; and hence it was that the stalwart cataphract was ready in a moment for any emergency.

He was clothed from head to foot in fine chain mail of glittering steel, every web of which was so marvelously tempered that the whole weight was rendered insignificant, and was borne as lightly, almost, as a garment of cloth. It fitted close to the wearer's form, and from a little distance he might have been taken for a stark image, nervously animate, sinuous, and gilded over with scales of shining silver. His horse, also, was breasted and backed, with the same kind of armor.

With a hurried farewell he dashed away, his fiery and impatient horse leaping at once into a speed of movement which excited and thrilled the beholders. The departure was like the flash of a meteor; a blaze of light, a lessening train of lambent sparks, and it was gone.

It seemed a year of time to the anxious watchers before he returned; it was almost at the meridian.

But he came at last, riding rapidly; he was leading Carmyhl's horse;—the horse was riderless.

Phyloprase and Shalzamene looked, then uttered a cry of distress, and fell weeping upon the ground. The brothers stared, and were a shade paler, though silent; they waited to hear some dreadful tidings.

Shoza dismounted, and making a sign to the slaves, the horses were led away. Then he approached.

"Dear sisters," he said, "restrain your tears;—brothers,

nerve yourselves for action; Carmyhl lives, but I know not where he is."

"Tell us all, Shoza," said Movis; "tell us everything."

"I rode to the cavern," the soldier responded, "and the first object I perceived was the horse, standing motionless by the side of a great rock. I saw no marks of violence in any place, and rode from thence all about. I returned and dismounted. I searched the ground with the utmost care;—the ground is barren there, and strewn with rocks of vast size;—I passed between all of them, calling loudly, and descended into many hollows, exploring the darkness. I startled a number of serpents, and killed a monstrous one; I looked far and near, I shouted, and listened, and shouted again, but heard nothing in response, and discovered no sign. It was as though our brother had vanished in the dew of the morning. Then I reflected a moment. It was plain to me that no accident had befallen, because the horse was calm, and had not been ruffled. 'Twas Carmyhl's favorite horse, *Antares,* taught to realise and to obey a command. Carmyhl had commanded him to wait. Then I knew that our brother had undertaken another project, the performance of which would necessitate his going afoot and would require several hours before it could be accomplished. Not that I know this to be so, but that I believe it so thoroughly that my fears for him have utterly vanished."

"What project is it, brother?" asked Ahmad; who, with the others, were so eager to assign a plausible reason for Carmyhl's long absence that Shoza's words gave a large measure of relief.

"Why," responded the latter; "he has gone to the marsh in the hills where the almug grows, to get a branch of the flowers for Shalzamene; our sister wished for one, and for a young fawn, also. The way to the marsh

lies something beyond the Black Cavern, but it is a treacherous way, and no horse could traverse it."

"Oh, woe is me!" cried Shalzamene, with a fresh access of grief; "He may be lost there; he may sink in the stagnant pools; he may be ambushed by the monsters that infest them. Oh, why did I speak of such a task, to kill us all with sorrow!"

"There are no monsters there," said Movis, reassuringly; "and if he went there, he is safe enough. But where is Mithreb's messenger? Our priestly brother promised to send immediate word to us from the temple; the time is long past."

"I will go and see Mithreb," said Shoza; "and come you also, Ahmad, for I must go from the temple to the city, and will be glad of your company thither, since your own holiday, like mine, ends with to-day."

Their horses were led out accordingly, and the two brothers, one all sparkle and formidableness, and the other grave and quiet in his long belted tunic of purple cloth, and white, turban-like fez, prepared to ride away together, first taking affectionate leave of their brothers and sisters, and confiding with them messages of love to their parents when they should come forth from their chambers.

Shoza admonished the slaves to return Carmyhl's horse to the great rock by the cavern as soon as it had been fully refreshed; and then, with a wave of the hand, and a word of hopeful encouragement in farewell, he rode away with Ahmad by his side, and they were soon beyond the limits of the demesne of the House of Hepsai.

The path they pursued was not a long one. It led downward, and then along the bank of the river in a nearly straight course, until, coming to a rocky promontory covered with vines and tall trees, it curved inward, and so led them by a detour to the opposite side of the

obstruction; in a few minutes after passing it they arrived before the broad platform of the temple.

It was an imposing building of white stone, every block of which was carved into a rich and complex lace-work, relieved at intervals by larger projections wrought into shapes of the most fantastic character. A flight of marble steps led up to the grand portal.

There was no sign of a human presence anywhere, and the loneliness of the place, the darkness of the adjacent grove, and the stillness of the air, were impressive to a high degree.

The brothers rode around to the farther side of the temple, where was a grim, cloister-like structure overgrown with vines, and shadowed by immense cedar trees. Shoza dismounted, and leaving his horse in the care of Ahmad, —to whom he explained that it would serve their purpose better were only one of them to enter the temple,—he returned to the porch, and entered.

The interior of the building was gloomy and mysterious, since the light of day was not permitted ingress, and such objects as were visible at all, were discernible only from the ghastly and fitful glaring of the flames upon the altars where the incense burned. The walls were shrouded in darkness, but the giant forms of a number of pillars could be seen in the midst.

At the back, against a yet more deep profundity of blackness, loomed the hideous and colossal figure of the god of the mountains. It was forty feet in height;—a sitting figure of gilded bronze, with a face purposely wrought to express a calm benignity, and with outspread wings on its arms and shoulders; a figure well calculated to inspire awe in the breasts of believers, and a face cunningly devised to excite their devotion.

As Shoza hesitated, somewhat marveling that no at-

tendant priest had come to him at once on his entrance, there was a slight sound perceptible, as of the rumbling of a wheel over a bridge; then a clear silvery note as though a bar of steel had been lightly struck with another.

This was proof enough that he had been observed, for a visit from so distinguished a votary as a king's cataphract was an event worthy of note, and the eyes of the priests were vigilant, despite the darkness which concealed themselves from view.

Following the sounds, there was a startling transformation.

A pale sheen of light, like a wall of thin crystal self-illumined, was projected upward from the ground in front of the image, and reached from one side of the temple to the other: the high pedestal with its jewelled temple to the other: the high pedestal with its jeweled ornaments, the barrier of carved marble which separated of porphyry which stood at equal distances apart upon it, and a glimpse of some gorgeous, but indefinable shapes, were thus disclosed through it as through a luminous and perplexing veil.

As Shoza gazed, deeply touched with awe,—he was not prone to visiting the temples of the gods—a procession of young girls in snow-white robes advanced two by two out of the darkness at one extremity of the mystic light.

They were the vestals of the temple.

They walked slowly, or rather glided like immaterial spirits, in front of the barrier, past the pedestal, and finally into the hiding darkness at the other side of the temple.

It was like a dream; they came, as it were, out of space; they passed through the light, they thrilled the eyes with the beauty and grace of their appearance,—and then vanished as they had come.

Dahlymel was one of them, but, like the rest, appeared to be unconscious of all things; their faces were lifted up, and their arms were crossed upon their bosoms; it was as though they walked in their sleep.

With their departure the light faded, and in a few moments gave place to the usual semi-darkness wherein all was vague, and everything seemed unstable.

The presence of Shoza in the temple being known well enough, some invisible hand ignited the sacred bulb which was the usual preliminary and accompaniment of prayer. As the odor of arborvitae began to pervade the thick atmosphere, the cataphract prostrated himself before the idol, then rose up and stretched out his arms in invocation.

"Great Alpleh of the mountains!" he said; "Grant me thy gracious favor and tell me:—Where is Carmyhl?—where is my brother?"

In a moment, the answer came from the lips of the god; its voice was strange and disquieting; it was harsh, rasping, and hollow; though distinct, it seemed to come from immeasurable heights:

"The hunter is abroad. Let the young lion be wary."

"Where is my brother?" repeated Shoza, not content with so vague an answer.

"Where the birds flock," said Alpleh.

Shoza was furious, but restrained himself.

"Great Alpleh," he cried, "have mercy! Where is Mithreb, then, that I do not see him here? It is his province to minister at thy sacred feet, yet he comes not to speak with me. Tell me!—where is Mithreb? Where is my brother?"

"Seven days shall the servant of my feet be restrained," answered the idol.

"Why?—thou inscrutable god!" asked Shoza, trem-

bling with anger yet still restraining himself;—"Why?—I beseech thee!"

"For seven days, or for seven years. Depart."—The answer was abrupt, and contained a menace which was not to be lightly regarded.

Shoza was discomfited, but his proud spirit rebelled. His heart rose up in his throat, and the sudden passion of his anger urged him to desperation. He stood a moment dumb and seemingly acquiescent; but love, and a growing fear for his brother's safety, prevailed, and he thought to defy the god. The step was bristling with supernatural horrors, but—

With a swift stride to the left of the altar, where ne knew that the only communication between the open temple and the jealously guarded secret shrine within was situated, he groped with his hands through the heavy gloom.

All at once he felt himself in the clutch of a powerful hand, and stumbled against the robes of a stalwart priest.

"Son," said the latter, "how is it with you?"

"Holy sir," replied Shoza, in as calm a voice as he could command, "I pray you, permit me to speak with the vestal, Dahlymel."

"It is not permissible for any creature to pass this barrier," was the answer; "and no man may approach a vestal, or speak to her, in the sacred precincts of the temple."

"Tell me, then: Why is my brother restrained?"

"Because great Alpleh wills it. Depart at once!"

"Not as I came!" replied Shoza, in a low voice shaking with bitter anger.

He seized the priest by the throat with one hand, and with the other plunged his dagger to the hilt in his bosom; the priest sank down noislessly to the ground, and for a

brief moment Shoza glared upon him like a tiger. Then he passed through the low archway, guided in his course more by the fugitive glintings of the many jewels incrusting it, than by any more definite help.

Quickness of action was now essential, as well to his personal safety as to the success of his dimly defined project; to be discovered there, was to be destroyed on the instant, and he searched the unfamiliar space with the eyes of a lion at bay. The penetralia of the temple, into which he had come, was dimly lighted from an aperture in the roof overhead; it was a pillared chamber of considerable extent, and strange images, and the varied paraphernalia of the mystic rites observed on certain occasions, were faintly perceptible in the gray obscurity. The wide stone pavement was unincumbered, and its barrenness gave a solemn aspect to the place; a narrow opening in the wall at the farther side seemed to indicate a portal there, through which communication was had with other and more secret chambers.

Close to the place where Shoza had entered, the wall rose up to the roof like a vast screen, separating the outer temple completely from the inner, and forbidden parts; seen from the other side, the wall was the background against which the mighty image of the god loomed so weirdly.

He had scarce taken a step forward when a cunningly concealed and wholly unsuspected door in the wall-screen, within an arm's reach of his face, was suddenly opened, and the bulky form of a black-robed priest came forth into the twilight.

A look of frightened dismay on his dark and evil countenance changed in an instant to one of malignant fear, but Shoza leaped upon him before he could utter a sound, and bore him to the ground.

The priest was strong and sinewy, and writhed in the hands of his assailant like a frenzied serpent; but the passion of the cataphract was beyond restraint, and his dagger once again relieved him of an adversary.

He sprang to his feet and looked within the opening where the door was still ajar. It was very dark there, but to his astonishment he perceived that it contained a ladder of bronze, which was reared at a slight angle to a faint spot of light above.

He hesitated. The situation was perilous in the extreme, his escape from it dubious, and the end uncertain; —perhaps a bloody and fatal ending. His mind was tortured with fears for his brother Mithreb, and crawling spectres of fear for his sister Dahlymel; and yet whether to hasten towards the opening at the farther side of the chamber, and prosecute his search beyond it, or whether to make an instant dash for the barrier through which he had forced an entrance, and so make his escape while there was yet an opportunity, he could not determine.

It was but a moment's indecision, however, for on glancing through the door at his side, he was urged within by some powerful motive whose nature he could neither define or resist. He put his hands to the ladder and ascended it. Perhaps it led to the open roof, and if so, escape was assured; perhaps—

But the ladder ended in a small oval chamber of bronze, and he had scarce attained to it before the mystery of its situation was dissipated.

He had pierced the thick armor of a vital secret!

His face paled with the conviction of his own audacity, and he staggered back as if struck by a powerful hand.

He was in the interior of the head of Alpleh!

Within the head of Alpleh, the great god of the mountains!

He trembled;—realisation came slowly.

Then the cord broke,—the cord which held his faith to its life-long allegiance; he pressed his mailed hand to his forehead and groaned.

But wake, torpid soul!—the time for thought is not now. A bold and hazardous resolve took possession of him; before ever another movement should be made, or a deed performed, or a word spoken, the false oracle should ignominiously retract its cruel dictum.

He could see, though but mistily, through the carefully parted lips beyond whose perfidious curves he stood; he looked down; it was forty feet to the marble pavement.

The fumes of the burning incense hung upon the upper air and clung close to the ceiling; they penetrated through the lips of the brazen image. On the ground below, two or three figures, priests of the altar, as their white robes declared them, were moving slowly here and there, with all the profound apathy of their caste; it was plain that knowledge of the double tragedy had not as yet transpired.

Shoza looked about him, and perceived a curiously wrought instrument,—something in the shape of a recurved and twisted horn. He was quick-witted, and knew at once that this was used as a medium for disguising and exaggerating the tones of the voice. Without further delay, and, indeed, hardly conscious of what he did, he applied it to his lips and uttered two hesitating words:

"Alpleh speaks!"

He was startled by the effect which was produced. The priests below threw themselves instantly upon their faces and remained there. The spirit-like forms of

several vestals seemed to grow suddenly out of the surrounding gloom; they glided swiftly into the pale glare of the tall cressets which flamed in front of the altar, and stood motionless, looking upward with adoring faces. An unseen hand placed the cabalistic bulb in the dish prepared for it, and immediately a dense cloud of incense proceeded from it and shrouded all things from view.

Shoza knew that his opportunity had come; he applied the horn to his lips again, and spoke deliberately:

"Sons and daughters of the holy place," he said, "take heed. The lord of the mountains is appeased. The servant of his feet is forgiven. Loose him, and restore him. He shall hunt the young lion where the birds flock. Send him forth with the vestal and the leopard, instantly, —for a day, and a day, and for half a day; twice, and thrice again. Until the sun sets let none others leave the temple. 'Tis Alpleh speaks! Rise, and obey."

Shoza was amazed at his own boldness, marveling much that he had been enabled to give so good an imitation of the words and style of the false god; doubtless long familiarity with both had made him capable.

He could not penetrate with his eyes the suffocating smoke of the arborvitae incense, but a certain indefinable commotion below him, and a fancied stirring of the sluggish atmosphere, neither of which would have been remarked had his senses been less intensely strained, seemed to indicate that his behests were already in process of execution.

The oracle had spoken to some purpose.

Shoza was convinced that the secrets of the penetralia were so rigidly kept that only a chosen few were intrusted with them; and he knew that the barrier which kept the worshippers from intruding, was efficient also in keeping a dangerous knowledge from the priests of the outer tem-

ple. The thought was reassuring; it was also a spur to action.

He descended the ladder at once, until coming to the bottom, he perceived that the body of the priest which he had left lying in a heap on the ground, was now in a sitting posture!

He was breathing heavily, and held his hands close to his breast, apparently but half conscious.

Shoza drew his dagger,—then paused.

He bent down and examined his victim; looked at his wound; felt his heart-beats; lifted his eyelids to read the signs upon the eyes. Convinced that he was not mortally wounded, he darted out and closed the door upon him.

He had taken less than half a dozen strides toward the place at which he had made his entrance from the outer temple, when he came in contact with a tall figure robed in scarlet, but at his touch it fell with a crash, groaning, and lay prone upon the pavement;—it was the guardian of the barrier!

Shoza could scarce believe his eyes; he thought he had killed him at the gate. Then, with a strange revulsion of feeling, he stooped and made a swift examination of the body. He saw at once that the priest was exhausted from the loss of blood, but that his death was not imminent. The discovery caused him to smile grimly, and to look upon his dagger with a whimsical feeling of doubt. His recent success, however, had so pleased him, that the edge of the bitterness of his anger was dulled.

He rose up and passed safely through the barrier, screened from observation by the density of the gloom which was intended to perplex and awe the devotees in the outer circle. It was like a horrible dream, and his head swam with a conflict of emotions.

Almost before he was aware of it he was standing in the bright sunshine of day, on the platform before the temple. A priest in a white robe came up the steps from the edge of the river and hastened toward the great portal. Shoza stopped him with reverential formality;—it was necessary to dissemble.

"Tell me, holy sir," he said; "why are the usual ministrants of the temple invisible to-day?"

"Son," replied the priest, "the altars are served efficiently to the blest, whether they are in part, or in full, environment. But to-day, our brothers were constrained to go down the river for a sacred purpose. I have just come from thence, and they will return together presently. I perceived you within; but as you prolonged your devotion, I was about to tell you that if you would go your way before the night, you should depart now, since the veil of the temple is being drawn, and will not again be rolled aside until the stars shine. It is the command of our beneficent lord, great Alpleh, who desires to meditate."

Shoza smiled, as the priest went into the temple; but the rumbling sound of the great gate on its brazen wheels reminded him that the ground whereon he stood was dangerous.

He sought out his brother Ahmad in the shadows of the trees, and without at once explaining what had transpired, urged him to mount.

They mounted their horses in haste, and rode swiftly away.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN the sun went down on the previous day, bringing the Festival of Propitiation to an end, and signaling the departure of the happy guests from their participation in the added joys attending the celebration of Carmyhl's majority, the latter took laughing leave of his brothers and sisters, embraced his parents, and began his ride to the distant forest in whose depths the Black Cavern yawned.

He was lightly equipped for the venture, regarding it more in the aspect of a frolic than a serious and possibly dangerous vigil.

His dress consisted of a long linen tunic of alternate white and blue vertical stripes, reaching down about midway between the knees and ankles and belted at the waist with a leathern girdle to which were attached a number of small pouches, and a sheathed dagger; from the right shoulder, across the back, and to the elbow of the left arm, the tunic was draped in such a way as to fall in scarf-like folds just below the belt; and though it would be hard to say whether this arrangement was intended for use, or for ornament, in either case it gave to the wearer a highly picturesque and dashing air. He wore leggings of fine leather, which were terminated by shoes soled with brass; on his head, was a narrow peaked cap of silver-gray fur; his hands were bare, and at his back, with the hilt conveniently resting between his shoulders, was the curved sword in its leathern scabbard, without which no adventurer ever went forth alone.

His road led him past many small hamlets at first,

where the inhabitants were numerous and very gayly occupied; their labors had come to an end for the day, and they were now spending their leisure in games and trials of strength or agility.

As the handsome and graceful young horseman dashed through their midst with a pleasant greeting for all of them, they desisted for a moment to admire the charming spectacle. The lord Hepsai and his gallant sons were well known and well beloved.

At the end of an hour's swift ride, the twilight had given place to night, but the stars were so numerous and brilliant that objects by the wayside continued to be easily perceptible. The road led upward, deviating in many places from a straight course, and by degrees becoming more wild and deserted in appearance. The last vestige of a hamlet or habitation of any kind was soon passed, the cultivated fields gradually became merged into extensive pastures, and these ultimately lost themselves in a wilderness of broken and tangled woodlands.

At the expiration of almost another hour, the road had dwindled to the merest bridle path, and had become tortuous and perplexing to such a degree as to be no longer trustworthy as a guide. Carmyhl then drew rein and proceeded with more caution over the stony ground. He had been there twice or thrice before, and remembered its peculiarities well enough to enable him to move with reasonable ease and certainty.

In a short while he came to a dense forest of pine trees, the scattered fringes of which he had been groping through ever since he had left the doubtful guidance of the diminishing path. Before him was a vast wall of impenetrable darkness, out of which came the aromatic breath of the pines, moist and cold.

At first, he appeared to find an embarrassment in the

situation; and came to a full stop, to recall if possible, the features of a place with which he was not thoroughly familiar; and haply noting some peculiarity in his general environment, moved forward again cautiously, first in one direction, then in another, and finally emerged once again under the starlight.

At this point, the edge of the wood was so sharply defined that it suggested the intervention of some human agency; it was also marked by the presence of a great rock, beyond which the tremendous cliffs of the mountain rose up vertically, losing their outlines in the sky. Going nearer, the venturesome rider was brought to a halt by an impassable barrier of splintered rocks and boulders of immense size, and was confronted with a number of hideous openings in the mountain, close, jagged, lofty, and black with a horrible darkness.

These constituted the Black Cavern, famous in all the mountains for nameless terrors; the reputed lair of devils and malignant monsters of every kind; the place whence sickness and pain issued, and whence the lightnings came; a place abhorred; a place feared and shunned.

If Carmyhl felt any secret trepidation, it was not perceptible on his countenance in the bright starlight. He guided his horse carefully between two of the greatest of the isolated rocks, and coming to a halt, calmly awaited the passing of the hours.

He was schooled in patience as well as in fortitude, and before many minutes had elapsed had fallen to dreaming over the varied and splendid projects natural to his bright ambition,—projects which had only waited for the day of his majority to be fully launched upon a course of speedy execution.

Two or three hours passed away in this pleasant absorption of his fancies, before he awoke, as it were, to the

reality of the present moment. He looked up at the starry sky, and knew by the signs there that it was a little past midnight; several hours yet remained of his lonely vigil before it would be time to take up his homeward way.

The situation became irksome; the air was chill, and the gray rocks seemed to draw their mantles of lichen more closely about them, and to shiver, waiting for the day. Close beside him, the great branches of the pines swept down to the very ground, softening its asperities, and augmenting the intensity of the shadows there; his horse stood rigid and immovable, like an image of stone; —the moon arose, and silvered the towering cliffs to a ghastly unsubstantiality.

Hark!

From the deeps, far down, a tremulous thrill of the softest melody; the nightingale was awake in the fragrant branches, and greeted the queen of the stars.

Still farther away, the black puma wrestled with his mates, and the lion looked in upon them, glaring with displeasure.

Yet again,—hark! A terrible cry, as of a child in agony; it was a sloth bear, wandering up and down through the shuddering woods, calling out upon the stars, and the risen moon. But the earth was yet asleep; the earth still dreamed.

Carmyhl dismounted, and putting his arms about his horse's neck, spoke three cabalistic words in its ear in a low voice, with an interval between each word. The horse threw up its head, shook its mane, and relapsed again into the rigidity of its previous quiet; evidently, it had received with intelligence some command or message from its master. Carmyhl then took from a receptacle attached to the saddle, a slender rod a span in length; and, throwing a comprehensive glance all about him, made his

way slowly toward one of the chasms in the side of the mountain. He purposed an idle exploration of the place, as a diversion from ennui; the state of inaction which he had maintained so long, had become unbearable.

At first, the ground between the rocks and boulders was comparatively level, and was hard and smooth, offering no impediment to his advance. But as he neared the base of the towering cliff, where the largest crevice in the mountain yawned forbiddingly, the way was cumbered with fallen masses of stone crumbled into great and little particles, and the ground was seamed with dangerous rifts and hollows. It was a hazardous venture, and would scarcely have been more easily conducted had the light of day been present to reveal its lurking perils; nevertheless, the very qualities which would have daunted a less acute and determined spirit, served merely to pique the desire of Carmyhl to overcome them, and after persistent toil he succeeded in reaching the cliff, and stood finally in the portal of its cavern.

Looking within, he could discern nothing; the darkness there was profound and repellent.

He took the small rod which he had brought with him, opened one end of it by pushing aside a metal disc, and rasped it with a quick sweep against the rock.

Instantly, it broke into flame, and became a torch. The flame was small and flaring, of a sulphurous green color, but it afforded light sufficient to reveal the objects within a radius of fifty feet.

His first discovery curdled the blood in his veins. He was standing on the brink of a hideous pit, whose width and depth were beyond comprehension!

His light failed utterly to show either the limits of the one, or the abysmal reaches of the other; the soles of his feet were within an inch of a terrifying plunge.

He drew back with a gasping shudder, and clutched at his breast like one who represses a sudden and whelming emotion. Another step forward,—an inadvertent movement, even,—and he would have slipped through the horrid void to inevitable destruction.

He recovered himself quickly, and looked about him. The scene revealed by his torch was circumscribed, but it was awful in its nature, and impressive by its simplicity. It was a shapeless hollow of black and impenetrable darkness, flanked on either side by the glinting rock of the mountain.

He rolled a great stone to the edge of the pit, and pushed it over, and listened for the sound of its falling; he strained his ears intently for a minute,—for two minutes,—and then a faint echo came from below. The pit was frightfully deep.

Carmyhl was so much disturbed by the incident of his escape from unspeakable disaster that he drew away shudderingly. He replaced the cap on his torch, extinguishing it; and felt his way carefully over and between the scattered stones, towards the high rock on the other side of which his horse was waiting in patient obedience.

His withdrawal at that juncture was fortunate; it was like his escape from death a minute before.

He had scarcely gone twenty paces, when, chancing to look backward, he was startled and amazed to see a cluster of moving lights intermittently appearing amidst the trees like so many yellow stars. He stopped, and after a moment's observation saw that they were issuing from the wood, and nearing the very chasm from which he had just retreated.

He retraced his steps for a space, being urged by an imperious curiosity. He was so hedged about with the difficult litter of fallen crags that he did not fear discov-

ery; and besides, although the moon was shining in the heavens, it gave no direct light to his immediate vicinity, and that circumstance added to his confidence. Before long, he understood the meaning of the lights.

They were ten torches, borne aloft by as many black slaves, five of whom preceded, and five followed, a line of six stalwart men, cumbered with strange burdens.

The slaves were clothed in white, the bearers wore dark purple tunics fantastically emblazoned with silver, and the burdens were the limp bodies of three men, apparently dead, covered each with a red cloth.

The men came two by two, one after the other, one of them grasping the feet, and the other the shoulders, of the body between them.

Arriving before the mouth of the pit, the slaves took up their positions, five on either side of it, and held their torches at arm's length above their heads.

Not a word was spoken.

The first two of the men with the gruesome burdens then advanced to within a yard of the brink. They stood a moment in preparation, then swung the body between them to and fro, twice or thrice, with the evident purpose of giving a greater impetus to its plunge; then they let go, and the body shot through the smoky glare and was swallowed up.

Two others of the men succeeded them, casting their burden into the maw of the cavern in the same manner; and the third and last couple followed, and, with a great swing, completed the dreadful sepulture.

The ceremony did not end, however, without an additional horror.

As the last body showed momentarily in its flight, it writhed with a great spasm, and a thrilling shriek issued from it and rent the solitude of night.

The men seemed dismayed. They pressed forward to the brink, and the slaves held their torches as far within the cavity as they dared to reach. As they strained their eyes and ears in an attitude of expectancy, it was as though a venging flash of lightning had burned the shocking episode into the flinty rock of the precipice.

In another minute the spell was broken; slaves and executioners came away from the cavern in a body, the torches gleaming redly upon them and emitting trails of baleful smoke; they returned in the same direction whence they had come, and were dumb, as at the beginning.

Carmyhl followed them stealthily, striving to catch a glimpse of a face, but he strove in vain. They kept close against the side of the cliff, which, at that point, was an almost vertical wall of solid rock; and wound away like a fiery serpent, leaving behind its trail of blood. The branches of the pine trees hung above, branch above branch, like the folds of a black pall; the moon was invisible because of them, and the stars were extinguished.

Then a marvelous thing happened. While his eyes were still fixed on the moving lights, they suddenly ran together as by some magical attraction, faltered a moment, then vanished utterly. Their evanishment was not from the interposition of any hiding rock, or branch, nor from their swift withdrawal into the obscurity of night; but it was instant, while in mid career; it was like the snuffing out of a candle, and so resembled the passing of a grim phantasmagoria. The young lion was astonished.

He stood and stared with all his powers of concentration, but not even the stirring of the night air rewarded him. He lighted his torch again, and hastened forward to the spot where the phenomenon had occurred.

He found himself surrounded on three sides by the thronging trunks of the pine trees, which glimmered

vaguely under the influence of his light, and had the disturbing effect of concealing an enemy behind each one of them; on the fourth side, was the bare rock of the mountain pinnacle. He went close to the rock. Bare, and gray, and without a flaw or fissure of any kind, it loomed up spectrally, and vanished out of sight;—'twas very strange. He went yet closer and held his torch above his head, moving it from one side of the barren space to the other, observing it wtth critical minuteness.

All at once, he paused; he had discovered something.

An uneven line on the face of the cliff, described, though faintly, the shape of an upright parallelogram, a yard in width, and three yards in height; if it was a door, it was very cunningly devised, being evidently formed from the same rock; but how it had been chiseled free with so little loss of its substance as to show merely those almost imperceptible cracks, was a mystery; how it was manipulated, was a greater mystery.

Carmyhl was convinced that it was a door, and felt chagrined because he could not understand it wholly. In the midst of his perplexity his eyes rested casually on a crumbled slab of stone which was lying against the bottom of the cliff at a little distance away. Something about it suggested a nearer view, and yielding to the mild curiosity which it excited, he approached it and found that it was partly overlapped by another and similar one, and that still another showed its jagged edge above it.

He flared his torch against them, and perceived that they offered a means of ascent up the face of the mountain. They seemed to have been piled there with a purpose; though rough, and tumbled, they were veritable stairs.

Without pausing a moment to consider the possible danger to which they might lead, but impelled by a lively

sense of the novelty of the night's experiences, he began the ascent at once, holding his torch in one hand, and his naked sword in the other.

The stairs were easily mounted, though unevenly and inconveniently placed; from one step to another, in some places, the rise was comparatively shallow; but in other places it was steep, some of the steps being at least a yard high. It was evidently in pursuance of some misleading or baffling design that so many discrepancies had been permitted, for no eye unaccustomed to the closer study of those remote and solitary places would have seen in the rugged debris on the mountain side so improbable a thing as a pathway, or a flight of stairs.

At a height of sixty or seventy feet, Carmyhl perceived that the steps were beginning to occur at less frequent intervals, and a little way farther on, they ceased entirely, merging themselves by imperceptible degrees in the general smoothness of the unbroken cliff. At the same time, he found that he could go no farther in that direction, because of the steepness of the mountain; it was now a perpendicular wall.

While he stood irresolute, questioning whether, after all, it was a cunningly contrived path, or only a whimsical notion of his own, suggested by a chance assemblage of broken stones, he saw that daylight was beginning to appear; and, not wishing to attract attention to his strange position from any possible observer, he put out the light of his torch, sheathed his sword, and began reluctantly to return by the way he had come. His failure to meet with anything which might have led to some explanation of the mystery of the participants in what had seemed a cruel tragedy, detracted much from the satisfaction he naturally felt in having successfully accomplished the greater part of his vigil; but on reflecting that he could come

again at a more fitting opportunity, prepared for a rigid search, he descended the steps with a care which was rendered necessary by the vagueness of the morning twilight.

He had descended perhaps a dozen feet, and was now but a little way below the tops of the pine trees which brushed against the mountain, when, in stepping from one of the ledges to another, he trod on a round stone and barely saved himself from falling over the edge to the rocks below, by clutching suddenly at the corner of an upright slab. The slab moved, but not enough to endanger his safety.

The movement attracted his attention, and when he perceived how large, and therefore necessarily heavy, it was, he marveled. He put his hands upon it again, to try its stability, and under his pressure, it yielded.

It was balanced on a pivot, and could be moved around from one side to the other; it was a door, indubitably.

Carmyhl's heart bounded with gratification. That was not the place, of course, at which the weird procession had been so summarily swallowed up,—it was far above it;—nevertheless, here was something tangible at last, a thing worthy to mark the beginning of his new life; here was something which should try him, for he was determined to prosecute the adventure wherever it led, until he could read the riddle of the night.

He turned the slab, and stooping, passed within; the slab returned of its own weight to its closed position, being balanced in such a way as to insure that result.

The space within was narrow and dark, but not so dark as to be utterly so; it was rather a gray kind of gloom which brooded there, and the place itself proved to be a long and slightly ascending passage. The mitigation of the darkness was caused by the presence at irregular in-

tervals of small loopholes cut through the rocky wall at one side, which was doubtless the outer face of the cliff.

After proceeding in safety for twenty yards or so, Carmyhl observed that the direction of the passage was changed so as to penetrate inwards, and in consequence the gloom deepened and finally melted into profound darkness. He was on the point of resorting to his torch, when a faint roseate glow began to manifest itself, and almost at the same moment he saw at some distance in front of him what appeared to be a dozen upright bars of fire.

Startled, he hastened forward and perceived that an iron gate was fixed into the wall, barring his further progress; a great light from the other side of it, streaming through its lattices, accounted for the fiery bars, and was the cause of the duller glow along the passage.

The air had now become not only warm, but fragrant; it was saturated with spices.

A faint sound, as of music, was perceptible, seeming to rise from a great depth; then there was silence again; and again, the sound of music, and the unmistakable sound of human voices. The voices were raised in carousal, but came from a vast distance; there were men in the heart of the mountain!

Carmyhl was now oblivious to everything except the possibility of overcoming the obstacle of the gate. A thrill of expectation was excited in his breast, and his eagerness to participate in the wonders of the night refused to be daunted; not the faintest whisper of a warning against a dangerous surprisal in that unknown place came into his mind.

Through the strong bars of the gate he could make out but little, except that the open space revealed there appeared to be compassed in the limits of a small square chamber, across the opposite side of which the wall

reached up from the ground only a few feet,—perhaps as high as his shoulder,—the ceiling of the chamber terminating immediately above it; beyond the opening thus formed, was a vast space filled with light.

The effect of that tremendous glimpse of vacancy was most disturbing; no object of any kind appeared there; there was not even a variation in the glowing atmosphere to suggest a shape or a substance distinct from itself; it was like looking from a window into the limitless depths of a golden sky.

He examined the gate with growing impatience, but could discover neither lock or hinges; he knew it to be a gate, merely because it yielded slightly when he pressed against it. Then he remembered how the stone slab which had given him entrance into this wonderful place had turned so easily on its pivot; perhaps the gate also,—

But suddenly the gate began to slide, under his continuous efforts, and he saw that he could push it sidewise, clear within the wall; it moved on invisible wheels.

CHAPTER V

CHARMED with his victory over what had promised to be a most vexatious termination to the adventure, Carmyhl rolled the gate partly aside, and passing through, made his way immediately to the half-wall opposite. His view from thence comprehended something more tangible than empty air.

Beyond, and above, was a great concave of rock, roughly hewn, and supported in the middle by a stupendous rocky pillar; pillar and concave were formed from the same material, and had been chiseled in the heart of the mountain by cunning craftsmen, much as the cavern-temples of the gods were wrought in the hillsides of the lower slopes. But the wall, low as it was, was an obstruction, and Carmyhl could see nothing of what was below. He hesitated long before venturing to mount it, and at last bethought him that since the long passage had led so distinctly and exclusively to that singular chamber, there ought in reason to be some equally marked an exit from it.

He walked around it carefully, searching the surface of the walls for a sign. As he passed his hand over the smooth gray surface of one of them, he perceived that it was solid rock and that there were no marks upon it, neither projections or depressions along its uniform evenness. The next wall,—that in which the gate was situated, and which stood opposite the opening where the great light appeared,—proved to be of the same nature; there was nothing at all perceptible upon its face, below, or above. Then he examined the third wall, but that

also was free from any signs. Discouraged, yet not wholly daunted, he returned to the half-wall.

It reached up to a slight distance above his shoulders, and appeared to have been chiseled to a finer surface than that of the other walls; he put his hands upon it preparatory to drawing himself up to the top; the coping was wide, and afforded him a firm grasp.

His feet had scarcely left the floor, when he felt that the wall was yielding; it was soft; his knees swung against it and pushed it from him.

Alarmed by the incident, for it seemed as though the wall was about to fall outward, he leaped back to the solid pavement of the chamber. Then he examined the place where he had meant to climb, and found that instead of a veritable wall, a heavy and thick curtain of painted cloth was suspended with rare ingenuity over an open space; proceeding in his discovery, he descried a flight of steps leading downwards at a steep angle, and he descended them boldly, but with caution.

There were hardly more than a dozen of them, and at the bottom was what appeared to be a continuation of the passage he had already traversed; it was somewhat wider, and was certainly greater in extent; its unincumbered space led away to the right for an immense distance.

On reaching the foot of the staircase, he was almost overcome by the splendor of the spectacle which confronted him.

On the right side of the passage which began there, the wall extended far away in a straight line, relieved at frequent intervals by doors partially veiled behind heavy silken draperies; the ceiling of the passage was at least twenty feet in height, and rested outwardly on an interminable series of arches supported by slender pillars;

it was, in short, a gallery of vast extent, and, looking through the pillars, a wonderful scene was presented.

A golden radiance which almost amounted to a dazzling brilliancy, suffused the atmosphere from a myriad lamps which clustered on lofty tripods, plainly visible a little way below. The stupendous mass which constituted the central pillar upholding the rocky concave, loomed at a slight distance away; its upper part had a striking resemblance to the plumed head of a gigantic palm tree, and its base was carved with an extraordinary fidelity to nature into a group representing a number of elephants posed in various attitudes of warlike grandeur. In every direction on the ground below was an undulating, glittering sea of color; a sea so overwhelming, indeed, that the floor of the chamber,—if it could be called a chamber,—could not be seen in any place on account of the constant shifting of magnificent particles.

Men and women were there to the number of several hundreds, and their demeânor was free and gay to a very great degree, yet was marked by a stringent abstinence from anything which could by any possibility be assigned to wantonness, or to an indulgence in too much familiarity. The men seemed accustomed to all the elegancies of a superior caste, and were tall, graceful, and athletic in almost every instance; the women seemed also to belong to an elevated sphere, and were spirited, elegant, and beautiful. All were arrayed in splendid garments.

Carmyhl looked down upon the scene as one in a trance; it was like a vision of enchantment; a conjuration of the wildest fancy. There was a magical unreality about it, which held him in a kind of thrilling suspense.

He observed that there was a uniformity in the costumes of the men, though the women's garments were conspicuous in their variety of fashion, color, and adorn-

ment. The men wore tunics of purple silk, lavishly embroidered with silver and belted with large scales of the same precious metal; leggings and shoes of polished brown leather corded with silver; and curiously shaped caps of white silk, which fell down behind, to their shoulders.

The women were arrayed in flowing robes of every conceivable color, gauze-like and brilliant in texture, white, pale olive, rose, gold, and silver, pale blue, and scarlet; jewels of extraordinary lustre sparkled on their hands and arms, and at times their feet could be discerned, twinkling like stars.

The voices of the revelers came up in conversation and laughter with almost distinctness enough to be intelligible; but since there appeared to be a universal indulgence, nothing definite was to be gathered from the general confusion of words.

All at once, a hush fell on the assembly. The voices ceased to be heard, and the laughter died away. A strain of music then arose from some distant quarter, and the company separated themselves into two bodies, leaving a broad space between them, like a lane; the pavement thus exposed, was of highly polished red porphyry, and was clear for a considerable distance, terminating finally in a lofty archway draped with cloth of gold.

From the archway, a glittering cavalcade emerged, and advancing slowly through the lane, approached the imposing group of carved elephants which formed the base of the great pillar.

The leading figure was a man of colossal stature, with a kingly air and a grace of form and carriage which denoted physical perfection. He was clothed in the same manner as the other men, except that the ornamentation of his tunic was wrought in blazing diamonds instead of

in silver, and that he wore upon his head a round golden cap, on the crest of which was a white vulture. He was mounted on a magnificent black horse, whose trappings were of silver, and whose long mane and tail were partly overlapped by a silken fillagree threaded with diamonds.

After him, rode a number of others who were in all respects like the men in the general assembly, but were mounted on white horses. Then came dancing girls in yellow silk skirts, their long hair loose, and their ankles tinkling with silver bells.

Carmyhl was fascinated, and could neither stir from his position of fixed wonderment, or comprehend the meaning of what he saw; the scene was absorbingly beautiful. As if in the thrall of some wondrous dream, he stood, a silent witness, forgetful of all hazard, and prepared for almost any manifestation of a potent, or even of a supernatural force.

The horsemen drew themselves up at the base of the pillar, forming the arc of a circle with the horses' heads facing inwards, and the chief personage amongst them, the one who was mounted on the black horse, took a position in front of one of the elephants, where a number of slaves in gorgeous apparel attended him with especial marks of homage; they bore prodigious fans of curling feathers on the ends of gilded poles, and held them upright, so that they resembled a swarm of fantastic butterflies hovering about the heads of the horsemen.

The music then changed its majestic character to a quick and lively measure, and the giant figure lifted his hand as a signal to the dancing girls; who immediately advanced with their timbrels and began to whirl through the mazes of a complicated movement, throwing themselves into attitudes of exquisite grace, and changing the

pictures of the dance with perplexing but delightful frequency. Carmyhl looked, and forgot all else.

He did not see the shadow issuing from one of the curtained alcoves; the shadow emerged suddenly, and with a leap was upon him.

Before he could realise what had happened, his hands and feet were bound fast, a thick hood was drawn over his head, and he felt himself borne swiftly away.

Surprise was smothered in the lightning-like abruptness and unexpectedness of the assault. He was neither surprised, or whelmed in fear; he felt no apprehension; for two or three full minutes he was possessed with a vague idea that he was floating through darkness in a dream,—floating from the house of the gods, perhaps to the gardens of the gods; it was glorious; it was a dream to be remembered.

But then he awoke to a consciousness of his real condition; he knew all at once what had befallen him.

His peril was imminent, and he strove with all his might to free himself; his strong young muscles cracked in the intensity of the strain to which he subjected them. It was in vain to struggle, however, and realising the futility of all efforts, after repeated attempts to win control over his limbs, he yielded to necessity and became quiet.

A vision of the pit harassed him. He saw once again its horrible mouth, gaping, and remembered its terrifying gloom, its awful depth; he saw the slaves drawn up on either side of it with their flaming torches held high above their heads; he saw the men in purple,—who were they? —he saw what they had thrown into the pit; he heard once again the despairing shriek.

His mind was so wrought up by the ghastly reminiscence that he would have cried out had his face not been covered closely by the hood; he felt the perspiration ooz-

ing from his brow and penetrating to his eyes;—how long would it be, before he should feel the stinging bite of the assassin's dagger in his breast and heart?

His captors came to a halt and laid him down, as it seemed, on a stone table. The terrific fancy seized him that in a moment he would feel the plunge of the dagger in his breast, and his blood ran cold in his veins.

But instead, a voice broke the silence, speaking to him.

"Young man," it said, "you have discovered the secret of the White Vulture, and you must choose between instant death, and its alternative. Resistance is useless. The arbiter of your fate will speak with you presently, and your answer to his question will end all. Do you submit?"—and the hood was drawn from his face.

"I am well snared," answered Carmyhl, "and deserve the uttermost. I submit."

Immediately, his limbs were unbound, and he was free, though still a prisoner. He arose and stood upon his feet, as three figures made a hasty exit, and the snap of a brazen door told him that he was locked within the chamber. He looked about him, still partially bewildered.

It was a small room, roughly hewn in the solid rock; in the middle, was a large square block of porphyry, like the sacrificial altars in some of the minor temples;—Carmyhl shuddered. Otherwise, the room was wholly bare, and dungeon-like. In the wall at one side, there was an upright slit, half a span wide and a yard high, through which sufficient daylight was admitted to dispel all gloominess; and opposite to it was the entrance, closed by a large door of bronze.

It was not possible for him even to surmise into what part of the mountain he had finally been brought, and the opening in the wall was too high above the floor to per-

mit of his seeing through it plainly; he could only see that the rock which it pierced was evidently a part of the face of the mountain, for otherwise so great a volume of light could not have made its way in; the wall at that place was certainly shallow.

The appearance of the daylight reminded him of his recent vigil, and of its disastrous ending; but before he had time to indulge in self-reproach, or even to think coherently on any theme, the door was suddenly opened, and two men entered.

One of them was huge in bulk, being a head and shoulders taller than the other, who was also tall and athletic. They were similarly arrayed, in white robes reaching to their feet; the robes being so disposed as to conceal their heads and faces completely, thus imparting to both of them a weird and repellent aspect.

The door was closed again from without, and the visitants approached and stood a moment silent by the block of porphyry.

CHAPTER VI

CARMYHL received his visitors with calmness; he had already disciplined his mind to accept the ultimate fate in store for him, whatever it might prove to be, without showing dread, or evincing fear.

The larger of the white-robed figures then moved a little way apart from the other, and said in a deep voice whose distinctness was in no wise impaired by the veiling drapery of his garment:

"We know you."

"If you know me," answered Carmyhl, "I am saved from confession."

"But yet, answer plainly;" continued his inquisitor: "By what name are you called?"

"By a synonym;" the captive answered, as a vivid sense of his recent foolhardiness came uppermost in his mind; "hitherto,—until yesterday,—I was an ass; but it was thought that the night would metamorphose me into a lion. The lion is discreet, however, and so 'tis more than likely that I am still an ass."

"Ass, or lion,—by what name are you called?"

"By either,—as you choose. You say you know me."

"And if we did not, would you keep your name a secret?"

"Close;—more close than that of the bottomless pit."

The figure started, and stepped back a pace, visibly agitated; the other figure moved a step backward, also; then the first, recovering, said:

"How came you by *that* knowledge?"

"By an accident of the night, like the one which finds me here."

"And you saw —?"

"I saw,—from a distance."

"And you know—?"

"I know nothing; I am innocent of spying."

"But you followed—?"

"Followed, but vainly; I lost what I followed."

"So!—One thing, at least, you are ignorant of." He appeared to be much pleased with the implied assurance that the sudden snuffing out of the funeral expedition was a secret still unfathomed. "But," he continued, "how came you in the gallery of the pillars?"

"By way of a stone door, an iron gate, and a curtain of cloth."

"Gods of the hills!" exclaimed the questioner sharply; "How did you find them?"

"Like everything else, it was an accident of the night."

"And no one beside yourself is acquainted with the secret?"

"No one that I know."

"Tell us how much you knew of this place before the night fell."

"Nothing. The Black Cavern bears an evil reputation in the minds of men, but its terrors are wholly conjectural, and are used to frighten children with. Until to-day, no man knew its secret."

"But to-day it is known?"

"To me, it is partly known."

"And to no one else?"

"I think to no one else."

"Our peril is not so great, then. We know that you speak the truth, for a son of Hepsai could not lie."

"Neither could the White Vulture be unjust."

"Ha! You know me?"

"As well as need be; I saw you, crowned, a while ago."

"True;—I am Plahdron. And now, the alternative; will you accept it?"

"The alternative of what?"

"Of death."

"What is it?"

"To be one of us."

"No."

"You are over-bold, young sir,—the spurious virtue which prompts your answer has betrayed many others into needless harm. We are robbers, you would say?—marauders?—birds of prey? You are in error. We are men associated together for the purpose of alleviating the perplexities of the unsuccessful. We equalise the burdens of existence by taking from the superabundance of the few to ease the necessities of the many. When the branches spread too vast a shadow in the garden, the flowers become pale, and their bright hues are faded; the sunlight is barred, and the birds are discouraged and become listless; the air is thick and damp, and there is no pleasure in walking there. But we do not kill the trees,—or greatly injure them;—*we prune the branches.*"

He paused at the end of this figurative speech, as if to permit its meaning to be fully comprehended. For some reason or other not clearly apparent, his imperious demeanor was qualified by a very palpable desire to conciliate the prisoner.

Carmyhl remained silent and motionless, with his eyes fixed abstractedly on the block of porphyry; it was wide enough at the top, and long enough, to afford room for even the great bulk of the giant before him;—how easily his own slighter figure would lie there!

He was recalled to the critical aspect of the moment by hearing himself addressed again, but in a milder tone.

"We are loath to lose you," said Plahdron; "and will regret sincerely your rejection of our clemency. Nevertheless, our law is fixed, and no man can swerve it. Consider:—*the world is beautiful.*"

"Were they spies, whom your law removed?" was Carmyhl's irrelevant response;—the porphyry stone, seemingly covered with blood, was perpetually looming before his eyes; he was fascinated by it.

"No;" answered Plahdron; "they were slaves of the chambers, guilty of disobedience. But again, I say,—consider. We are twice two hundred in number, and more, and have our wives also, to share our pleasures, which are many. You shall choose a virgin out of some noble family, and a priest of the temple shall marry you. You will live here, in luxury; and go from hence, at times, into many and divers places,—to the cities of the plain,—to Palibothra, even;—even to great Prophthasia itself. Your comrades are gentlemen; some of them are princes, some of them scholars, some lords, and some of them are priests."

"Priests?" echoed Carmyhl, evincing incredulity; "Priests, in league and brotherhood with robbers?—*Priests?*"

"Priests of the very altars;—and some of them you know."

"Priests?" repeated Carmyhl, absently.

"You hold them sacred?" queried the giant.

"Sacred!" responded the captive fervently; "More holy than other men, certainly. Above other men, they are acquainted with the gods, and can speak with them. They can move them to grant what we ask; to scourge our enemies; to assuage sickness; to ease poverty; to show

us the right way, and to help us find it; to keep us from dishonor; to crown us with victories. Do not the priests receive our prayers, and take them, and lay them at the feet of the mighty gods? And do not the gods themselves answer us through them because they are holy men?—I stood in the temple, once, asking a boon, and the god Alpleh, who sits enthroned there, answered. His voice is terrible; he speaks with the tongue of authority, and his words are unanswerable."

Plahdron turned to his silent companion with a gesture which his garment did not hide; a gesture which said plainly enough—"Mark the credulity of an innocent mind!"—then taking a step forward so as to bring himself nearer to Carmyhl:

"Do you know my face, young man?" he asked abruptly."

"No;" answered Carmyhl; "it was shadowed by the white wings of your head-piece; I know you by your stature, only."

"Again, I am fortunate.—And now, we must have an end to all uncertainties. Had you been other than a son of Hepsai, we would have given judgment upon you long since; as it is, if you still refuse to come to us voluntarily, you must die."

"Might I ask who told you I was a son of Hepsai?" Carmyhl ventured, apparently unaffected by the threatened horror.

"Ask what you will; since there is no escape for you, you shall have all the knowledge you desire. But first, remember that your father causes us much embarrassment, and that your family are a perpetual menace to us, which we cannot in prudence overlook. One of your brothers has even counseled you to compass our destruction: and though we have no fear on that account, it be-

hooves us to make the most of our advantages. As to your question, my faithful lieutenant, here,"—pointing to his companion,—"could answer more properly than I. He knows you well, as he is bound to know all the young men of the province."

Carmyhl regarded the speaker with a distrait look, and instead of repeating his question, said slowly:

"Sir, show me a priest of the temple in the garb of your calling, and I will make my choice of your alternatives more easily."

"There are several of them with us now," said Plahdron; "go with us a litle way, and you shall see them. A glimpse of the snakes which nest in the holy places will haply turn your inclination to our house, and make you join us willingly. Be wise;—'tis an awful change, from the joyous world to the pit of everlasting darkness. Come."

"And yet, stay a moment," said Carmyhl, hesitating; "you have said that you will grant indulgence to my reasonable curiosity; tell me, then:—who is the man who has betrayed me?"

"He is before you; ask him."

Carmyhl advanced a pace toward the other figure, but the figure drew back a pace, evidently disconcerted.

"Sir," said Carmyhl,—"your name?"

The figure remained dumb.

"At least," said Carmyhl, "let me hear your voice."

There was no answer.

Carmyhl sprang upon him with the suddenness of a thunderbolt, and bore him to the ground; before the astonished Plahdron could stir to prevent it, he had torn the white robe open, revealing the flushed face and dark hair of his contumacious victim. It was Sept.

Carmyhl bestowed a single glance at the features of his

whilom friend, so unceremoniously bared, uttered an exclamation of surprise, and released him, rising to his feet. Plahdron laughed behind his veil.

"A lion, indeed," said the giant, with evident relish; "it behooves me to guard myself, lest a like calamity befall. But are you wiser than you were?"

Carmyhl was silent. He held his brow in his hands, and Plahdron observed that he was singularly and violently discomposed.

Sept rose up with a muttered curse, but restrained himself from anything like retaliation. Then Plahdron said:

"Come! Let us go hence, for we must shortly separate."

But Carmyhl turned away, saying, "I beseech you, by the honor which is imputed to all brave men, spare me the presence of a traitor to the sacred bonds of friendship. Send him away; 'tis your prerogative, as lord and master; and I will follow you alone."

"So be it; you shall be humored still. Sept, return to your place, and remember that vigilance is necessary even when no cause for it is apparent. Had your friend been vengeful, a lion's caress might have sent you all too soon to the cavern's maw."

Without uttering a word in response, Sept opened the door and departed, leaving it ajar. Plahdron struck his hand upon it, and the sound which was elicited from the brazen panel denoted that he was clothed in mail, and presumably invulnerable.

In response to the signal thus made, the door was instantly opened wide, and four black slaves appeared with naked swords. They were dressed in a strange garb of metallic green and purple, which left their limbs exposed and their breasts bare; they wore bracelets of tinkling gems like fringes of garnets upon their arms, and were

shod with sandals of skin which made their footsteps noiseless.

"Come!" said Plahdron; and went out, Carmyhl following, and the slaves gliding beside them closely.

It was a vast chamber into which they had come, though no ceiling was visible in the upper darkness; at regular intervals, a mass of blue flames spluttered and hissed on high and fantastically wrought cressets, affording a weird and confusing light, which was yet strong enough to show the rough rock of a continuous wall close to the right; to the left, was a cavernous vacancy of darkness.

At the end of perhaps a hundred paces, a disturbing sound of rushing waters began to make itself heard, and a glowing light, red and misty, appeared as if from beyond a near turning-point. A little further, and the wall to the right came to an abrupt end, and then, still to the right, another phase of the White Vulture's wonderful habitat was revealed.

It appeared to be a kind of antechamber, or vestibule, and was lighted by great lamps burning perfumed oil. At one side of it was a broad stone basin inclosed by a rim of porphyry and brimming with water, out of the midst of which a thick fountain was spouting up and down, high and low, with a noise which would have been musical had it been out in the light of day or amongst the trees. At the other side, a wide staircase led up a little distance, and was screened at the top by a heavy curtain hung across in numberless folds from wall to wall.

Plahdron paused here to give some brief command to the attendant slaves, who instantly placed themselves, one at each corner of the upper and lower steps; he then ascended, still followed by Carmyhl,—who was again beginning to doubt the reality of everything he saw,—and

THE TRAITOR UNMASKED.—*Chapter* 6.

[redacted]

the curtain being drawn aside by an unseen agency, they passed through and found themselves in a bright radiance.

It was a gallery, the opposite side of which was hung with silken curtains, some of which were partially drawn aside and held back by heavy cords, thus permitting the entrance between them of the strong light from some place beyond, and apparently below them. A number of luxurious couches, and several chairs, were scattered about, and the floor was thickly carpeted with velvet.

"From this place," said Plahdron in a subdued voice, when they were both seated, "we can look directly into the refectory of such of my people as belong to the temples. Here, they not only take refreshment, but arrange their necessary disguises prior to going forth in the interests of the oppressed. This is the place reserved particularly for their ladies, who are accustomed to gather here for the purpose of observing and conversing with them, but I have directed that none should enter while we are here. It is not necessary for me to repeat what I have already said; you know the alternatives, and that they are inviolable. I promised to show you a veritable priest of the altars, wearing my livery;—I will show you several. When you are convinced of the excellence of the company with whom I am desirous you should associate, I think your scruples will vanish, and then 'tis but a step for you to the freedom and advantages of a life worth living. Be cautious; observe well; think;—and then decide."

Carmyhl sighed. From his earliest childhood, the subtle beauties of the temple worship had impressed him, and a passionate belief in the teachings of the priests had grown up with his growth, fostered by circumstance, and strengthened by a singular continuity of very palpable blessings. His religion was natural, emotional, purely

carnal; and was garbed in a mysticism which made some flowery links seem veritable chains of supernatural power, binding the real and the visible to the merely vague and fanciful; it was in but a meagre sense, spiritual.

He had passed his early youth amidst the blandishments of the temple, its many splendid ceremonies, its joyous feasts, its numberless appeals to the higher aspirations of its votaries, and its constant stimulant to the imagination. His dearly loved brother, Mithreb, was a priest, attendant on the sacred altar, and especially revered because he was so far removed from the grosser life about him. And his beautiful young sister was a vestal there, and the influence of her purity and loveliness invested the mystic rites with a glamour which was irresistible.

Above all things, the soul of Carmyhl was bound up in the high virtue, the unassailable truthfulness, the superior and abiding charm and power of the holy caste.

It was because of this deeply rooted confidence in the vital things of his belief, that he hesitated before making the fatal test of Plahdron's infamous assertion, but his unbelief in the latter was so shaken by the giant's evident sincerity, that further waiting became intolerable. He drew near to one of the partially opened curtains, and looked.

Twenty feet below him was the floor of a circular chamber, whose dimensions comprised a diameter of possibly sixty feet, and a height to the rocky ceiling above of but little less extent; the floor was paved with white marble, and the walls were hung with a gorgeous tapestry. Twelve brazen lamps shaped like immense bowls with flaring rims, and each burning three clear and brilliant flames, were arranged on high carved pedestals, and gave forth a penetrating and faintly perfumed light. A large

table of an oval shape occupied the middle of the chamber, and numerous stools of ebony, upholstered in crimson, were scattered about; the table was littered with the remnants of a feast, amongst which jars of wine and salvers of fruit were prominent.

The company assembled there was not numerous enough to impart a social air to the place, but their varying aspects were sufficient to make amends, and to invest the scene with interest.

The first person Carmyhl's eyes rested upon at his initial glance, was a venerable old man with a staff, who was in the act of entering the chamber through a door at the farther side, and appeared to be so oppressed with fatigue as to be hardly capable of retaining an upright posture. His appearance, however, was greeted by the others with much laughter, and some of them hastened to lead him to the table, with invitations to recoup his waning faculties with a bowl of wine.

He met their advances in a most surprising manner. With a laugh in response to theirs, he straightened himself, gave his staff to a slave who had followed closely behind him, flung off his outer garments, plucked the long beard from his face, removed a silver-haired wig from his head, stretched his arms as if to relieve them of cramp, —and stood forth in a scarlet jerkin, showing the lithe and sinewy proportions of an athlete, and the fresh, strong features of comparative youth. His head was shaven, but that might have been in the interest of some personal vow or obligation; such things were common enough.

He drank a bumper of wine before speaking to the others, who were also men in the full vigor of their years, and, like him, were dressed in scarlet, but in addition, wore upon their heads the peculiar drooping white silk

caps or bonnets which had been so conspicuous in the brilliant assembly of the grand cavern.

"A truce to wandering!" said the whilom patriarch, filling himself another cup of wine, which he lifted high above his head before drinking;—"Four days in a rich field, and six pieces to my credit."

"Are they red, or white?" asked one, mysteriously.

"White, every one,—but slightly marred;" was the equally mysterious answer; which caused them all to laugh.

"And Sarab frets at fortune, because he gained but a dozen pieces," said another; "though 'tis true, one of them was red."

"Red, or white, it is so much more to the glory of Alpleh, whose bosom swells when he contemplates his sons,—provided they come not empty-handed."

When Carmyhl heard the name of Alpleh, the puissant god of the mountains, mentioned in that frivolous and disrespectful manner, he started, and a quick glow of anger flushed his cheeks.

" 'Tis strange, how easily great Alpleh condones an accident like that," said the first speaker, who was eating at the table with an appetite whose eagerness had been fortified by wine; "and stranger still, how severe he is on the whitest of us all if the culprit come not staggering under a load."

"A pleasant god, nevertheless," said one, "and not too exacting. I remember once, I came *dripping;* and reached the temple before my credit was announced. A terrible penalty was marked against me, and I gave up all for lost, when at the critical moment, my credit came. Ha! You should have heard the merry bellowing of the lord of the little hill-gods, as he forgave me and admonished me to keep my hands from spilling!"

From these, and other scraps of the conversation, Carmyhl was convinced that what they called a *white* piece was the fruit of a single robbery, gathered without the use of violence; that a *marred* piece was one achieved with violence; and that a *red* piece, was a booty gained by the shedding of blood.

He was horrified. He had often heard of the depredations of a mysterious association of robbers under the leadership of a powerful but unknown autocrat, who called himself the White Vulture, but, as he remembered, their deeds were characterised more by a maddening dexterity, and a peculiar annoyance in the mode of their accomplishment, than by any very frequent or noticeable act which involved either the killing or the maiming of any hapless victim.

He strained his eyes to get a better view of the one whom they had designated as Sarab; when, by a curious chance, that very person, in his restless moving about, came nearer to the balcony where he stood hidden, and removing his cap, smoothed his head with his hand.

His head was closely shaven; was it the sign of a vow, as in the assumed case of the other?

But his face looked familiar; a dark face, revealing a hasty spirit and a will not to be questioned. Carmyhl trembled;—whose face was this?

Suddenly he knew. It was the face of a priest of the outer circle in the temple of Alpleh, the god of the mountains!

And—Oh, Isyl!—there were many more, whom his quickened senses recognised; perhaps all of them were there!

He fell back a little, partially overcome by the revelation; but in the same moment the clear sound of a bell, twice repeated, was heard from some near quarter, and

as the shivering echoes returned from the vaulted roof, a voice proclaimed:

"The hour wanes;—make ready!"

Instantly, all was commotion in the chamber. The gorgeous drapery hanging against the walls seemed all at once to be ruffled by a breeze, but the agitation was caused by their being parted in several places to permit the ingress of numbers of other figures clothed in scarlet.

Numerous slaves also appeared, bearing in their arms quantities of gray and white material, which quickly proved to be the outer robes of the priests who were waiting to don them. Sandals were also brought, and were substituted for the brazen-soled shoes they had worn; in a brief space of time twenty figures stood arrayed in the sacred garments of the temple, some in gray, which denoted their special place in the outer circle, and some in white, which were the vestments of the ministrants at the altars.

Carmyhl's eyes were dim, and his heart felt cold within him as he gazed. A wild sea of doubt was beginning to rage in his breast and threatening to unhinge his reason. His soul was in a tumult.

Again, there were three strokes made upon the unseen bell, and again, as the trembling echoes dropped from the roof, the voice proclaimed:

"To the river, where the boat waits! In seven days, ten return. The way is clear. Be watchful!"

The priests were alert, and forming themselves in line, two abreast, began to march towards the open door.

Because of the great table in the middle of the chamber, and the perplexing disarrangement of the seats scattered around it, the only unobstructed way was along by the curtained wall, and this circumstance made it necessary for them to pass directly underneath the balcony

where Carmyhl crouched in an agony of warring doubts and fears, and where Plahdron sat in grim reserve and watched him.

Two by two, they came, walking sedately, their sandaled feet showing at every step from below the swaying of their robes, white or gray, which nearly touched the ground. The brilliant light shone upon their shaven heads, causing them to glisten; and each face, as it appeared in succession, was like a mask of wax cunningly wrought into an expression of grave humility.

Carmyhl noted each one with a fearful interest.

There were Ghaz, and Verya; there was Maedor,—he who had spoken slightingly of the great god Alpleh; and Khosha, who had answered him jestingly. There were Sarab, and Mahdron; there were Droa, and Pymahl; and Syvah, and Myrzha, and Craas,—all two by two, advancing grandly and impressing the beholder with the dignity of their aspect.

Oh, could it be possible that these magnificent men were false to their sacred trust?

Could it be possible that these were thieves and robbers,—some of them guilty of blood, some of them guilty of a cruel vagary of offense?

Oh, no, blessed Isyl! Isyl, son of Alpleh of the mountains, no,—no,—no!

Carmyhl's head swam; his eyes burned; his lips were parted and dry; he clasped his hands together and wrung them;—yet still looked on.

"'Tis but a dream," he said to himself repeatedly; "a dream engendered by the scorpions of the night. I know 'tis but a dream; and when I wake—"

There came Phlodru;—Phlodru was the oldest of the priests of the outer circle; in a few months he would be sixty years of age, and then the inner circle would re-

ceive him;—Phlodru;—and there was Og, walking by his side. There was Hesver; there was Prathe; there was—Zamar;—there—ah!

Carmyhl staggered back from the dreadful sight, reeling, and clutching his breast with his hands; he sank upon one knee, staring fixedly at the White Vulture, who sprang up, wondering.

"*My brother;*" whispered Carmyhl;—"*Mithreb;*" and fell upon his face, senseless.

CHAPTER VIII

In a small room whose asperities were clearly revealed by the light which came in through a round opening in the wall, Carmyhl lay on a stone bed, asleep.

The hardness of his couch was mitigated by several thick furred skins, and his head was propped on a pillow covered with cloth.

His face was very pale, and the expression it wore was one which indicated rest after suffering.

His clothing had been removed, and he now wore but a single garment, of a dark purple color.

The place was like a cell; the walls, floor, and ceiling, were barren rock, indifferently smooth, and coldly severe.

In time, as the moments crawled slowly, the position of the sun in the heavens was such as to permit a golden bar of radiance to enter the window briefly, and as it shone directly on the face of the sleeper, he awoke and sat up with a confused sense of his environment. His eyes were attracted first to the silken robe in which he was habited, and for a while he doubted his own identity; he then glanced at the bare stone walls, and looked at the open window, which was high above the floor of the chamber; and anon closed his eyes again, and strove for help from a drowsy memory.

At the same moment, a cunningly contrived door whose existence had not been manifest hitherto, opened softly, and a strangely uncouth figure entered the room.

It was that of a man of possibly fifty years of age, stout and strong in appearance, but a dwarf in height,

being scarce taller than a child. His arms were abnormally large and long, and with the tips of his fingers he could easily touch the floor without stooping; his head was of immense size, and, joined to such a diminutive body, had the effect of a bristling fungus superimposed on a bulbous and fantastic base. Nevertheless the face of the monster was beaming with good humor, and an unmistakable air of kindliness marked the large but regular features.

He was clothed in a tight fitting jerkin of some curious green material, whose metallic lustre was suggestive of gnomes or dragon-beetles; he wore no ornaments, and carried no weapon.

Closing the door gently, he advanced a little way and seated himself on the floor within arm's reach of the bed, whence he regarded its occupant with much interest; in turn, he himself became abstracted, and stroked his curling and tangled beard silently.

After three or four minutes had elapsed, Carmyhl, suddenly opening his eyes and perceiving his strange and somewhat discomposing visitor, made a slight exclamation of astonishment; at which the dwarf became attentive, returning his gaze with a reassuring look of the utmost friendliness.

"Where am I?" asked Carmyhl.

"On my bed," answered the dwarf;—"in my room, in the house of the White Vulture."

"But why am I here?"—then speaking more quickly,—"a cloud has passed from me, and my memory serves me well at last. I recall with all too-great a vividness what has happened, and recollect the judgment meted out to my refusal of a dubious mercy; and I ask you,—why was I spared?"

"Do you regret it?"

"Yes."

The dwarf laughed.

"Tell me," urged Carmyhl.

"Because I was deputed to slay you," was the surprising answer; "I was commanded to quench the wavering spark that seemed on the verge of extinguishment;—to hasten its going out;—to give you oblivion in the pit. So I took you; but—"

"But what?"

"I brought you here."

" 'Twas a cruel mercy."

"You speak without knowledge; had it been merciful to quench the light of your days, believe me, I would not have hesitated."

"Tell me who you are;—and why you have done this thing."

"I am Gryp, the executioner. I remove obstacles to harmony and safety; I execute the will of the White Vulture in all things whatsoever. He commanded me to slay you, and—I brought you here;" and he laughed again, with his hand on his forehead, turning his head sidewise and looking down.

"You are mysterious," said Carmyhl.

"I only ape my master, who was more than mysterious," answered the dwarf; "listen; I will tell you something: *In his heart, he wished you to live.*"

"That is strange; until this morning, he had never seen me."

"Until *this morning?*—Ha! I forget. It is six days since I laid you as one already dead, on the skins of my bed. Only twice, in that time, have you opened your eyes. I have come at this moment,—having watched you long and often, and poured elixir between your lips,—to make you eat what I have prepared for you. The fever

is gone, and you are well again. You must eat. You are to live, and not die. Every night, I have slept here on the floor by your side, ready to minister to you when the malady raged;—and I knew, but a little while ago, that you were safe enough;—wait."

He rose up and left the chamber softly, closing the door behind him; and presently returned, bearing a large basket on his arm, which he set down carefully on the floor; then he went out again, and soon returning with a small trivet table, closed the door, and proceeded to arrange a feast which instantly tempted the appetite of the invalid.

"Eat," said the dwarf, proffering the different articles of food, which comprised pastry, meats, and fruit; "—eat what you will, and presently you shall have a cup of this strong wine to drink. Meanwhile, I will take a bite with you for company's sake, and will drink to your happiness at once;" and he filled a large goblet from a jar of wine which he took from the basket, and drank with great satisfaction.

"You will slay me after all,—with kindness," said Carmyhl.

"I will finish the task I have set myself," answered the dwarf.

"And that is?—"

"To please myself."

Then they ate and drank in silence, Gryp manifesting all at once a disinclination to further converse, and Carmyhl relapsing into a mood of retrospection. At the end of the repast, the dwarf rose up and approached the wall under the window.

"I will show you the secrets of my habitation," he said; "no man, uninstructed, could find them out, neither could any man, not knowing them, escape from their embrace.

But first, come here and see if you can discover anything."

Carmyhl stood up, dizzily at first, but soon with a stronger and more confident feeling. The sensation of walking, even across that trivial space, was a novelty which convinced him that he must, indeed, have lain a long while on the stone bed, helpless.

At the dwarf's suggestion, he examined the wall carefully, and after a while perceived two graven upright lines about three feet apart, reaching from the floor to a third line, which connected them at a point a little higher than his head. He looked at them steadfastly, but failed to understand them. Gryp was vastly pleased; and going back to the head of the bed, stooped, and reached his hand under it.

No doubt there was some sort of mechanism concealed there, for, obedient to a slight manipulation, a muffled, harsh sound, was produced, and immediately the wall of rock comprised within the lines fell back slowly, rolling on wheels, as it seemed, until it had retired for six or seven feet; when it stopped, and stood like a screen before a dazzling light.

On passing through the opening thus made, Carmyhl found that they were in a spacious chamber whose walls were hung with gayly flowered tapestry; every requisite was there for living occupation; there were many kinds of furniture including the utensils of a kitchen; there was a stream of water pouring from an orifice in the roof to a wide brazen receptacle, which it filled, but did not overflow;—and along one side was a broad open casement through which the blue sky was plainly visible.

Carmyhl looked out, and was more amazed at the view presented than at the unexpected presence of the curious and home-like room in such a place. He saw that he was

in a high pinnacle of the mountains; far below, in the misty golden sunlight, a sea of green was visible; the hills and the forests were spread as a carpet beneath him.

Gryp was more pleased than ever, on witnessing the look of consternation on the countenance of his guest.

"But sir,—sir Gryp," said Carmyhl, confusedly, "how came I here?"

"In my arms," answered the dwarf; "I brought you here."

"This is a wonderful place. Is the whole mountain hollowed out?"

"The south side of the face of the mountain is like a honeycomb," he answered; "this is the highest cell of all, and there are myriads beneath us. At the bottom, yet reaching up to a vast height, is the chamber of assembly, in the gallery of which you were discovered. That chamber is called the Hall of the Elephants, and was originally a natural cavity in the mountain, and was approached from the northern side by a narrow passage more than five leagues in extent; through that passage, in the olden time, artificers and laborers were brought from the land of Magog, secretly, and, as secretly, they departed into their own country after they had finished their work. They were thick as flies, here; and delved, and carved, and removed, unremittingly. My grandfather helped to carve away the stone; more than six years were required for the completion of the great chamber, and five more years were spent in contriving and cutting out the lesser rooms, and the corridors which connect them. More I cannot tell you; the plan is a secret which is only wholly known to the commandant, and to four of his subordinate officers, of whom I am the least. But now I must leave you for a while, to attend to other duties. Make as free as you will with my domicile, and with whatever you find in it. Then,

—sleep. Above all things, sleep;—and to-morrow I will enlighten you further."

"But, Gryp!—*Good* Gryp; I beseech—"

"I will tell you nothing more at present, except that you shall keep your heart in peace. *You are to live, and not die;*—farewell."

With the last word, he retired to a corner of the chamber, and lifting a fold of the arras, passed behind it; from the bulging and movement of the silken hangings, it was apparent that he passed a little way to one side, between them and the wall, and then, the agitation subsiding, it was equally apparent that he had made an exit through some door which was concealed there.

Carmyhl had no desire to follow and examine the place, believing that he was no longer in imminent jeopardy; he placed himself at the window, and fell to dreaming.

Whatever the subject of his dreams, they had the effect of suffusing his eyes with tears; he sighed often; his soul was striving to recover its buoyancy after the cruel blow it had received. It was no small thing to sustain the shock, or to bear the weight, of the revelations he had been witness to; the roots of the tree of his soul's reliance were being laid bare to a deadly blistering; his precious religion, his paramount and joyous hope,—they were shriveling already before the insidious advances of a fire unseen, yet plainly felt to be approaching.

But youth, and perfect physical health, came to his aid nobly, and ere long, he slept a renewing, dreamless sleep. He awoke in the morning, refreshed, and made his ablutions; and ate freely, and even pleasurably, of the repast which he had anticipated finding in the larger chamber ready at his desire, without feeling surprise at its opportune presence there; he was beginning to accept all mysteries as matters of course.

As the first rays of the sun were beginning to gild the interior of his retreat, the dwarf suddenly appeared from behind the arras; he came forward and seated himself on a divan which stood at an angle of the window; he looked at his guest,—or prisoner,—and smiled.

"I am pleased," he said; "have you slept well?"

"Thanks be to Isyl, and to Alpleh, yes;" answered Carmyhl; "my soul slept, as well as my body; and for a space, oblivion held me close."

"Sleep is the potent medicine for every ill," said Gryp; "it is the only true physician."

"It is a blessed bridge," Carmyhl said, "spanning the gulf which lies between the days. We look back at eventide upon the misspent hours, and marvel at the follies we have committed; and grieve because we may not call them back and change the tenor of their meaning. But in sleep, there is a suspension of all sorrow; we find forgetfulness there, and our hearts beat lightly because even our minds are at rest. Nevertheless, the hour of awakening is very precious. In the morning, hopes revive, and the day seems fairer to our eyes than yesterday, because it is full of golden promises, like lotus buds newly opened. I have slept well; and am ready to meet your pleasure."

"I am pleased, indeed," repeated Gryp.

"Would to heaven I could say as much," responded Carmyhl.

"You shall,—when the time is ripe."

"And when will that be?"

"When you are disillusionized."

"Disillusionized?—Of what?"

"Of things abstruse and supernatural."

"You are enigmatic."

"I will be plain, then:—you believe in the gods?"

"Most sincerely. Are you fallen so low as to doubt them?"

"You believe in Alpleh, after what you have seen of his ministrants?"

"More especially, I believe in Alpleh; and most particularly in blessed Isyl, his son. Devils may wear the garb of sanctity for a purpose, but the gods will strip them and lay bare their iniquity. Has not my guardian deity already done so?"

The dwarf laughed.

"*I made him,*" he said.

"Made who?"

"Isyl."

"Yesterday," said Carmyhl, walking to and fro restlessly, "you promised that on the morrow you would enlighten me regarding things of vital moment. You confuse and mystify me, instead."

"If it will please you to sit down, I will tell you something;" said Gryp, indicating with one hand a stool, which occupied the opposite angle of the window; and when Carmyhl had complied with his request,—"I am desirous of enlightening you," he continued; "I have a reason for doing so, beyond, and aside, from that of obedience to the unspoken wish of my master;—who will say to me at the end of another six days, '*Gryp, this is the hunting season; is there a lion in hiding, near by?*'—and I will answer, '*There are lions in the desert, but none near by!*' Which means, that you are not *pitted,* but abroad, and free. He will smile on me then, and say—' '*Tis well, Gryp, we will hunt the tiger in his jungle, instead.*' And now I will tell you my reason for the interest I take in your welfare; which is a much deeper interest than that which my master feels. But first,—you have doubtless remarked the singular grace and beauty of my form and features?—

the elegance of my shape?—the exquisite proportions of my members?"

"I see nothing but the kindliness of your face," answered Carmyhl, somewhat surprised at the question, and a little abashed; "your eyes are honest; they are open windows, through which I can easily discern enough of beauty to be satisfied."

The dwarf looked at him with an expression of pleasure flushing his broad features; it might have been fancy, but his eyes seemed to glisten with a sudden moisture.

"I speak of myself from necessity," he continued; "and to make the way clear to your understanding. As you possibly know, it is not lawful in this kingdom to permit a blemished child to live an hour after its birth. In my case, the event was kept a secret at the passionate entreaties of my mother, who loved me the more because my spirit was so wretchedly housed. My mother served in the family of your father; she was wife to one of his farmers. Your father kept us in a secret place, and when I was ten years old had me conveyed to the safe keeping of an idol maker, whose home and workshop were secure from the eyes or knowledge of the world. In that place, the White Vulture saw me, and, thanks to some fortunate whim on his part at the moment, I was transferred to his custody, and brought to this pleasant harbor. This is my reason for regarding you with affection: that your father saved me; that had it not been for his noble kindness, my mother would have grieved overmuch, and have died of sorrow."

"My father's heart is golden," said Carmyhl; "he is ever kind, and is moved by loving sympathy."

"All the more, I rejoice in my ability to repay, however meagrely. And now for the company, whose abode is in this safe retreat. Some of them are lords of high station,

some of them are even princes; some of them are merchants, and some priests, as you have seen. They all have interests beside the supreme one of their association together in this place; they have their tasks, even. The merchants find a way to replenish their stock of valuables, and the nobles are afforded unique and hazardous entertainment in the levying of tribute towards the support of the master's schemes. As for the priests, their overplus of energy finds agreeable employment in adding to their own wealth and luxury, and in the prosecution of their secret intrigues; but more than all, they obtain a species of knowledge abroad which fits them admirably to meet the requirements of their caste, and in the cunning exercise of that knowledge they produce in the minds of the temple worshippers a wholesome and wondering awe;—omniscience, only, the people believe, could know so much.

"As for me, in my leisure moments I make idols. I am an adept. I carve, and gild, and adorn. As I said before, I made Isyl, who is as excellent a presentment of a god as one would wish to bow to. I had a difficulty with his left cheek, I remember, and there was a smirk on his visage which caused me to doubt my own cunning. But I removed it; I changed it first to a grimace, and then 'twas easy enough to mould the expression down to a very passable complacency."

Carmyhl stared incredulously at the dwarf as he brought his speech to so unflattering an end. Had he heard aright? Was it possible?

"You listening gods!" he exclaimed, rising up quickly and leaning from the window as if appealing to some invisible spirit in the sky; "Descend! Descend!—Ah, Alpleh, do you hear?—Isyl, do you hear?—Come down and refute this slander! From the edge of the cloud, come!

As Isyl came, so, Alpleh, send at once,—only a messenger,—only a messenger, to prove your holiness and majesty!"

He had resisted long, but even now, was despairing. Never before, until waking in this rocky crucible, had he heard the name of a god aspersed; never before, had the faintest shadow of a doubt been thrown across the lilies of his belief. For a while, he was so perturbed, yet so confident and expectant, that a veritable figure descending from the sky and entering the chamber where he stood, would not have seemed a wonderful, or even a surprising thing. He looked intently; his heart beat strenuously.

Nevertheless, the excitement of his spirit was more in the nature of a passionate rebellion against the acceptance of a belief which would shatter the fabric of his whole inner life, rather than in that of a firm and unshakable conviction of the truth and substantiality of his faith. It was but a brief excitement, however. The tentacles of doubt had already laid hold on his understanding; Since beholding his brother Mithreb in the role of a banded robber, his soul had questioned the probability of the gods being really hoodwinked by the iniquity, and doubt had come like a scorpion, or like a noxious vapor, to plague and harass him.

The dwarf regarded him silently, but with strong interest, for a space, and then said:

"Your belief is like that of a child in its toys; you have forgotten altogether to use the judgment which is vouchsafed to every person of comprehension, and I therefore adjure you to give your reason an opportunity to weigh the matter. Your father, and your mother, in common with all enlightened people, know that the figures of the gods,—and even that of great Belus, himself,—are carved

and moulded by men. The error which blinds them all, is this:—they believe that the performance of certain rites in the temples, by the priests, and the observance of certain ceremonies in their homes, by themselves, joined together, confer upon those images the power to see the secrets of the future; to arrange the programme of the fates; to settle the difficulties which beset existence,—for a price;—and finally, to assure to the devout a blissful and never ending life after death, in the high and delectable world of spirits. Mark,—these excellent powers and prerogatives are imputed to brass, and iron, and wood; to ivory, and alabaster, and marble, after those senseless materials have been wrought by the hands of men into shapes of beauty, or ugliness, according to the sentiment to be expressed; shapes which are more or less astonishing to the eyes, and embarrassing to the intelligence, but nevertheless are potent and holy."

"Is this the truth?" asked Carmyhl, falteringly.

Gryp stood up, and made an impressive gesture.

"By the great sun which is shining there on the window sill, by the light of it, and by its heat," he said, "it is the truth; by the blue sky which hangs above the earth, and is unreachable, it is the truth; by the living blood which courses in your body, and by the soul that looks from your eyes, it is the truth."

"And the gods are myths? The gods are but phantoms out of a cheating dream?—Do you tell me this?"

"The gods, as you have fancied them to be,—yes. They are mythical; they have no real existence; they are pictures of the idlest thoughts of men. They are wishes, all of them. The things which we cannot compel of natural circumstance, or achieve by means of strife, we wish for; and trust in the magical powers of some imaginary god to accomplish them."

"Is there no god, then, in all the world?"

"On the contrary, the world is full of gods. The gods are variable; no two of them are alike; and none of them are capable of action. Will you require it of a stone, that it shall speak to you?—or of brass and ivory, that they shall answer to your prayers?—Listen: A man may think himself superior to his fellows, and forthwith he becomes his own god. Numbers of such men, bound together by a unity of sentiment, agree upon some figure, or symbol, which shall stand to them as a palpable expression of their belief, and hence is evolved a god to whose altar they swarm like bees. A man may be avaricious, and of a hoarding disposition; and the god of that man is money, and its image typifies it. A man may be cruel and domineering, or he may be meddlesome and mischievous;—his god is power, and his idol is made accordingly, symbolising power.

"A man may be gluttonous, he may set great store by what he eats and drinks; he may spend his time in pampering the appetites of his body,—and his god is greed. A man may be a coward, and superstitious; his god is fear. A man may be envious, and a schemer; his god is hate. A man may be cold, and hard, and incapable of feeling either the sentiment of passion, or that of sympathy; his god is austerity. All these phases of the nature of a man, and more, are crudely imaged. Now, some men are essentially either dreamers, or possessors of infirm minds; such are they whose fancies are rife with mysticism, and prone to the vagaries of a distempered and fantastic imagination. These are the ones who succeed in building up more or less plausible theories as to the unseen powers of the air, and who in time have so systematised their plans, and furnished them with details and the way of moralities, and bits of cloudy wisdom, that a

religion is formed and fostered without the help of proofs, or the prop of a single truth to hold it upright.

"Of the men whose natures are sensuous and depraved, there are multitudes; greater multitudes, indeed, than your inexperience can conceive of; and their god is lust. I have yet to hear of the man who, in his nature, disposition, and practice, aspires to the highest reaches of the mind in beautiful, noble, and gentle things, has made to himself a god which he worships under the name of LOVE.

"As you see, you may have a god of your own choosing, and exchange him for another when he palls on your fancy. The ignoble qualities which I have ascribed to a few of the principal deities of men, are conserved in numberless temples, in the bodies of the images which have been made to hold them.

"It is true, these diverse gods are not called by the honest names I have bestowed upon them for your easier enlightenment; but are given flowery names appealing to the fancy, or names which express in a word a number of particular virtues exercised to particular ends by the deities which bear them. As for instance:—Alpleh, the god of the mountains, is looked upon as a shield against possible dangers; as a guide through difficult and perplexing affairs; and as a benign father, who is at all times ready to grant indulgences,—for a price. And Isyl. Isyl is believed to be potent in cases of a domestic and family nature; to be able and willing to assuage grief, and to banish sickness; to be watchful over the interests of the house that shelters him; and to prevent blight, and insure felicity.

"And yet, Alpleh is but a name;—Isyl is but a name. The first is made to appear as a veritable deity, by having itself attached to a visible and palpable habitation in the

form of a monstrous and mystical figure of bronze. And the figure was made by men, remember; hammered out of the metal, bolted together, carved, polished, gilded, and otherwise adorned,—by *men*. The same is true of Isyl;—I, myself, made Isyl."

"But Alpleh spoke to me;" said Carmyhl, hastily, as one who holds an indisputable truth of evidence and clings to it passionately;"—from his very lips, the words were spoken, and I saw, and heard, and know. How then could he speak, if he were made of brass, as you say? —how, if he were merely the gross and material image carved by men, instead of the omniscient god we believe him to be? Gryp, you have been deceived."

Gryp laughed; and his laugh pierced the heart of his listener.

"I will tell you a secret," he said, presently; "a secret which is not known to any but the idol makers, and the chief priests of the greater temples; to whisper it abroad, would be to extinguish a very serviceable, and a very profitable light, indeed. Within the body of Alpleh, there is a *ladder*. At the top of the ladder, there is a hollow chamber. Is it not conceivable that a priest, chosen and sworn to secrecy, could bellow the mystifying words of an oracle through a ram's horn, held to those parted lips?"

Carmyhl was silent; he trembled; and pressed his hands to his brow.

"I torture you, with these revelations;" said Gryp, kindly; "but I am constrained to hold a light to your feet; and am persuaded that you will live to bless the hour of the dragon's confidence."

"Not a dragon, Gryp,—you asperse the kindly qualities of your nature," said Carmyhl; "say rather, that on some day I may come to thank an angel of light, because of—because of—" but his emotion overcame him, and he sank

down on the window-sill as Gryp hastened to prevent his falling.

"You shall drink some wine," said the dwarf; "and afterward, you shall sleep again. Be courageous. The day is dawning."

CHAPTER VIII

THE next morning, at sunrise, Carmyhl was awakened by a sound of music which seemed to come from a great distance, and was indescribably mournful and affecting. He sat up on the stone bed, and listened. The melody was exquisitely sweet and sympathetic; there were chords in it which vibrated almost continuously in an undertone of the deepest and softest harmony, seeming to rise and fall as though fanned into gentle undulations by a breeze; and there were other chords, which thrilled, as the voices of birds in concert; and still others, like whispered songs on mellow flutes; and others again, like silver reeds, blown upon by fairy lips.

The source of the music was undiscoverable, and it was not until Gryp came to visit him, which he did at an early hour, that the charming mystery was explained.

Close above the window, was the top of that particular pinnacle in which the domicile of the dwarf was situated; and, access to it being had through a small opening in the larger chamber, an æolian harp had been constructed there of various chords of metal, which responded sensitively to the slightest movement of the air. When the zephyrs played wantonly upon it, the melody wooed from the harp was enchanting; when the wind blew strongly, the music evoked was strangely pathetic and impressive; when a storm raged, the music was terrifying and pitiless in the passionate energy of its wailing.

It was a zephyr playing, when the sun arose; and presently Gryp came in and seated himself quietly upon a divan near the place of his entrance.

Carmyhl was much moved by the sweet concord; he was peculiarly susceptible to the influence of music, whether of birds, of human voices, or of instruments; and in that particular, Gryp was like him.

They listened together in silence for some time, but at last, the breeze dying away, and the whisperings of the chords becoming so faint as to seem only the fanciful echoes of a rapturous memory, Carmyhl said:

"If one could be lulled to sleep by music, and so pass away unwittingly into the land we dream of,—that would be well; it would be an ineffable blessing. And I pray often, so to pass. Though having hardly yet begun to live, I already yearn to die. My soul is sick, and I pray to the gods to have compassion on my hopeless youth and take me to their abode;—but I pray in vain. Tell me, Gryp,—are prayers ever answered? I once thought they were; I believed they were; but that, perhaps, was a presumption of my ignorance. Tell me: are they ever answered?"

Gryp regarded him for a moment with an expression of mingled sympathy and humor; and smiled, as he answered:

"The plump fish you had for breakfast this morning, was the very palpable answer to a prayer of the poor fisherman who caught it;—at least, he said that his god had sent it. He lives by the lake, eastward of Soui, and has set up in his miserable hut the image of a wooden fish, covered with silver gilt; which is his only god, and he invokes it fervently every time he goes to cast his nets. One morning after a week of ill luck, he was so affected by dizziness as to forget his devotions, and at the first haul, brought up more fishes than he could easily dispose of. Perhaps he was dizzy this morning, also, for he brought us some delicious carp."

"We are all fools together, Gryp," said Carmyhl; "and the poor fisherman is no whit below us in his folly."

"You wrong us, and overpraise the fisherman; there are degrees of folly. The wise man prays for general blessings, but the fool asks for particular things. However, I suppose some of the gods deserve credit;—Isyl, for instance; who unmasked the traitors when he showed them to you in the refectory. Isyl appears to be an honest god, and if you really need the luxury of a spirit comrade, I would commend him to your acceptance in lieu of any other."

"No," Carmyhl answered; "none of these gods shall be mine; and as for Isyl,—ha! it is a bitter thought that brings my brother Mithreb in his scarlet coat to burn and devastate my soul!—Isyl slept. Oh, that my feet had slipped at the brink of the bottomless pit, before ever I had seen my brother a hypocrite, and false to honor. . . . But the idols of my days are fallen; I would rather the sun should be my god, as it is the god of the Persians. The sun is glorious; it gives life;—and no man made it."

"The sun is confined to a course through the sky, which never deviates," said the dwarf, "but continues on, forever and forever; it is like a river confined to its bed, and, like the river, must go no other way than forward; it is obedient to a law which to us is inscrutable. Therefore, I would not have the sun to be my god. I would have no god who is subject to a law, either of nature, or of man, as I myself am. For if the god I set myself to worship were to be hampered by a law, he would be of no more consequence, essentially, than myself. If law defined his scope, he would have no jot of the efficacy of a god worthy of the prayers and sacrifices of men, and could accomplish no more than,—if as much as,—a mere man."

"Your words cloud my soul with confusion," said Car-

myhl, looking out at the sky, but evidently conscious of nothing except the trouble and perplexity which were warring in his breast; "you make me doubt all goodness; you warp sincerity until it becomes hypocrisy; you make ambition a farce, and substitute a venomous serpent for the doves of purity and holiness. But it cannot be, that all men are deceived; it cannot be possible. The wisdom of the sages would be folly, if it could not fathom the deeps of men's deceitfulness. Tell me:—do the priests of the temples know that they are hypocrites? Are they cognisant of the things you speak of? Do they conspire together to cheat the multitude, knowing that their teachings are false, knowing that their words are lies?"

"To be just," answered the dwarf, "not all of them are consciously deceitful;—but very few of them, indeed. The priests of the outer circles,—those with whom the people are familiar, and of whom 'tis said they are multitudinous as the leaves,—they are rigidly taught from childhood, and they believe in all sincerity every jot of what they preach. They believe that the images are holy, every one of them, great, and little; they believe that the splendid idols in the temples were each a gift to men from the bounteousness of the otherwise unapproachable gods. Believing utterly, therefore, they are themselves believable; and the people follow willingly with never a question, never a doubt, never a thought except as to how well they can serve their own interests by serving those of the particular god they affect.

"It is a different matter, however, with the few and carefully chosen priests of the inner circles, who each have to serve a period of sixty years in front of the altars before they are admitted behind them. *Then they know;*—all mystery and power lie hid behind the altars.

"Your brother Mithreb has yet to serve twenty years,

before he can be received in the inner circle. Did I tell you the strange thing which happened in his case on the day of your taking? A messenger from the temple came in furious haste to command his instant return, though he had scarce been in the Vulture's house an hour. There was much wonder expressed, and more conjecture,—but he departed. It is not likely that he had offended greatly, or been greatly remiss; and he is a favored son of Alpleh. Priests may be forgiven if they lapse from duty, but the gods are not subject to the weaknesses of men."

"Gryp," said Carmyhl hesitatingly, "do you think the vestals of the temple are aware of these things?"

"No. They, at least, are pure, and are safely hedged about. Even your brother Mithreb, although aware of his own duplicity, knows nothing of the secrets behind the altars. Mithreb and his companions enjoy the vagaries they indulge in, and in all sincerity believe that they are hoodwinking the very deity they serve. The priests are not ascetics; they live;—the gods are not immutable; they thrive."

Carmyhl stretched out his hand and laid it on the knee of the dwarf, fixing his eyes steadfastly on those of his strange jailor.

"Something whispers in my heart that your words are true, Gryp," he said; "and though you have slain all my gods, and wrecked the happy fabric of my days,—I thank you. Yet, strange as it may seem to you, I believe there is a god whom neither of us has conceived, or even dreamed of. Where shall we find him?—is the question. I have seen nothing in all the years of my life up to this moment, which I could take to my soul to fill the hiatus you have made there. A veritable god is necessary to my desire; a god with power and kindliness for his chief attributes, Gryp, and one whose loving care may be relied

upon despite the machinations of men. Can such a deity be found, think you? 'Tis conceivable; but where shall we look?

"Now that my eyes are open a little way, I imagine that it would be much more reasonable to worship a man, even, than to pay devotion to an idol which is a thing of brass or ivory or wood, fashioned by the hands of a man. For whereas the idol is inert, inanimate, and void of power, the man is capable at least of understanding, and his power is limited only by the impossible.

"But I myself am a man; and therefore it would be worse than foolishness to make me a god of like quality.

"Ah,—there is a faintness within me;—I fain would sleep, and not wake again.

"Tell me, Gryp,—your eyes are such that you must know,—who made the earth we walk upon?"

" 'Tis said it was made by Baal,—and some say Isis;—I do not know."

"Baal is of the Egyptians?"

"Yes;—and Isis also."

"And the god of the Indaprathea, Gryp,—the god of the Issedons; of Palibothra; of Nerissa; of Gedrosia; of Prophthasia;—who is he?"

"He is the same with Baal, but we call him Belus. He, with his seven daughters, whom we call the Belides,—he and they together, rule us as one god; he is the great god of our people."

"An immaculate, and veritable god?"

The dwarf laughed.

"As veritable," he said, "as anything which your eyes can comprehend; but touching his immaculateness,—men made him."

"And yet you said he made the earth we walk upon."

"No; I said that others say so."

"Therefore no man knows?"

"No man."

After this, they both relapsed into silence; the dwarf was grave of aspect, and he looked out absently through the window to the blue sky; the expression on his face showed plainly that he waited for some final communication of a definite and personal character from the lips of his youthful charge. As for Carmyhl, his eyes were fixed upon the stone floor of the chamber, and he did not remove them, even when the harp upon the pinnacle without, began to tremble and whisper hesitatingly.

In a while, the music swelled upon the air like pleading voices, full of subtle sweetness.

The breeze of the morning freshened, and the nymphs of Eolus joined their hands in a whirling dance through the sympathetic strings; the music waxed in mournful tenderness; and the vibrant sighing of the under chords awoke the dreamers to the question of the hour. Carmyhl lifted his eyes.

"The more I think on the matter," he said presently, "the more confused I become. Certainly, there was a beginning to all things, and in the beginning, the earth was *made*.

"It has no voice to speak with, no tongue to answer with, no eyes to watch with; and yet it is full of living treasures, and gives us every needful and desirable thing if we but ask it, and obey its formulas. Out of the earth we are clothed, and out of the earth comes all our sustenance. If we plant, it responds with certainty; if we build, it furnishes us material, and supports the work of our hands through the ages; if we dig for treasure, it gives us more than treasure; more than silver, and gold, and gems. Whatever we need, whatever we have, or can have, comes from the earth, and from no place else.

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"Not as by accident; not *perhaps;* not in varying ways, sometimes in one way, and sometimes in another;—but always in the same way, always according to a law which is immutable;—or as if a plan for their guidance had been laid at the beginning.

"Is not this a wonderful thing to think of, Gryp?

"And it is the same with the sky. The days alternate with the nights with unswerving regularity; the sun and the moon and the stars are constant always in their courses, never deviating in the years of their movement.

"Who made them, Gryp?—for they must have been made,—in the beginning.

"Now, as my mind dwells on this mystery, I am persuaded that there is a God whose power is even greater than we can comprehend. A kindly god, I know,—for behold, how beautiful are the graces of the earth and sky! A god of power, I know, for no man,—not even a concert of the greatest and wisest of men,—could compass the bare conception of the things we see.

"Gryp, we must search in all places, for such a god is worthy of all honor, all devotion, all confidence and adoration.

"I will have no other god than this. My god shall be he whose wisdom is greater than my understanding, whose power is illimitable, whose works are transcendent.

"Gryp, I thank you because you have slain my idols. Is it possible that I could have thrown myself upon my face before them but a day's space ago?

"Ah, Gryp, there is a god in some undiscovered place,—a living, and a palpable god, mayhap, unlike the dull and senseless things to which we have bowed so long;—a god, I imagine, to whom we could pray, indeed, as to a father.

"Why,—when I was a little child, my father was my god; he was so wise, and great, and mystical, to my un-

derstanding, yet so loving, and so lovable, and attractive, in all his ways, and looks, and acts; so all-sufficient to my never questioning belief, so gracious to my ever joyous knowledge! And now that I am myself a man, my god must be a father to me, in whose omnipotence I can rest my soul.

"Oh, to find this god,—where shall I look,—where shall I go? I will have no other.

"Gryp, is it so late?—I am drowsy.

"You will call me fanciful, I know,—but there is music in this rocky haven. We are far from earth, you will say, —and farther still from heaven; the sound of flutes could not reach us from below, nor the melody of happy vestals from above; and yet,—hark!

" 'Tis very sweet,—'tis almost sweeter than I can bear.

"And now, even the twilight fails; I feel a dizziness coming upon me which makes my head whirl;—I will sleep awhile,—and then begin my search.

"But,—pray, forgive me,—your arm;—I faint,—I fall—"

CHAPTER IX.

THE air was full of melody in the wildwood; the birds were awake from their idle dreaming, and sang to the cooling breeze which came up from the river with the perfume of the lotus and the wild rose; the shadows of the great trees reached far along, over the blooms of the flowers, and carried into the depths a dew-like and delicious freshness.

The broad and winding path which led from the vicinity of the House of Hepsai to the margin of the river at the place where the temple of Alpleh stood upon its terrace in the beauty of sculptured marble, was fringed along its sides for a greater portion of the way by a dense and lofty verdure which gave it a most charming aspect of removal from the world of human interests.

From the temple garden, it wound upward through a slight hollow, but the ascent was in no way fatiguing, and scarcely noticeable; the variety of the wild flowers which crowded the slope, the gracefulness of the large-leaved and festooning vines, the wide spreading and sumptuously foliaged branches of the trees, and the occasional presence of some magnificent assemblage of rocks piled up and partly veiled with moss and creeping plants, were such as to make the way a succession of unalloyed delights.

Dahlymel, wrapped in her rose-hued mantle, came slowly along the path from the temple, leading her leopard by its thread-like chain.

The vestal was pensive, and the leopard, as in sympathy, was depressed.

The behest of the oracle as it had been issued by Shoza only a little while ago, had been promptly and unquestioningly obeyed by the priest whose function it was to guide the ceremonies before the altars; and while a swift messenger had been sent to summon Mithreb, Dahlymel had been relieved from her attendance in the temple, much to the unexpressed amazement of her fellow vestals.

It was because of that surprising incident that she was now absorbed in many and far from reasonable conjectures. Her life was so simple and flawless, her thoughts so innocent, her conduct and conversation so modest and free from reproach, that it was hard to find a reason for the temporary suspension,—but harder to reflect that the suspension might signify a species of reproof for the unconscious infraction of some minute, yet rigidly enforced law pertaining to her office.

Had she worn the gossamer robe in the proper manner before great Alpleh?—so as to let the light discover her pretty feet as she passed through the mystic glare?—so as to show her arms bared to the shoulder?—so as to permit a glimpse of her exquisite figure through the sheen of the drapery, as she passed the feet of the inexorable god?

Or had she put a drop too much of henna in the tulip cup?

Or had the lotus in the wreath of her gathering that morning been found to have lost its freshness?

Or—and the last conjecture was the most disturbing,—had Hyla fretted in his nook,—and showed his teeth, perhaps,—and frightened his attendant?

She could not tell. She could not know of any reason, because reasons were never vouchsafed in the temple; in the temple, a word was spoken, or a command given by signs, and instant obedience was exacted. She looked ab-

stractedly at the beautiful animal pacing with velvet footsteps at her side.

As she looked, the leopard made a low moan in a peculiar and restrained manner,—an almost inaudible sound, ending in something like a short trill in the depths of his throat; he reached up his head and rubbed it gently against her arm.

Dahlymel stopped at once, looking hurriedly about her, and evidently warned of something ungracious; her four-footed guardian had given her a sign.

She unfastened the slender chain attached to the silver band around his neck; and, hanging it at her girdle, placed her hand for a moment on his head, as if to signify her understanding of the message; and then quietly resumed her way. The leopard walked by her side with a keen air of expectation, though as yet nothing had appeared which might occasion alarm, and no sound other than that made by the songs of the birds could be heard.

The glistening pediment of the temple was out of sight, being hidden from view by the intervening rocks and trees; the path was lonely to a greater degree than at any other point in its course, because no glimpse could be had from it through the leaves, of any field or meadow, or even of any space more extended than that through which it wound its sinuous way.

Presently, at a turning point in the path, the leopard withdrew a few paces from the side of Dahlymel, and walked along stealthily, with his eyes fixed intently before him; it was as though he had taken scope sufficient for a possible encounter.

Dahlymel was equally alert, though marveling greatly at the unusual interruption to the habitual quiet and privacy of that little used pathway through the woods; and was beginning to feel the first touch of a vague alarm,

when the cause of it came in sight from the shadows beyond a flower-wreathed promontory of rock.

It was the uncouth figure of a man whose age was not easily conjecturable, though certainly in the neighborhood of forty years. He was naked to the waist, from which point a dark and weather-stained garment fell from its sustaining girdle of cord to his unsandaled feet; his skin was dark and tawny, showing the effect upon it of burning suns and abstinence from bathing; his head was uncovered, except by a prodigious tangle of coarse and faded hair, which, mingling with an equally prodigious beard, imparted a look of wild asceticism to the countenance that was cavernously visible in their midst. But his eyes were mild, large, and deeply contemplative; his cheeks were hollow, his nose long and sharp, and he walked with his shoulders bent, and his arms folded across his breast.

He carried neither staff, or weapon; there was no wallet at his girdle;—indeed, had the girdle and its skirt been removed, nothing would have been left to him beyond the withered skin which covered his bones.

He was slowly approaching when Dahlymel discovered him; but her first glance reassured her, and the incipient fears which had begun to agitate her bosom fled away at once; she smiled, and called Hyla to her side.

The figure was that of one of the sect of dull philosophers called gymnosophists, whose lives were devoted to a species of self-abnegation as to their bodily appetites, and, as to their days, to a close and presumedly edifying scrutiny of the various phenomena of Nature;—their dullness consisting not so much in an inability to apply their acquired wisdom for the furtherance of any particular benefit to the multitude, as in their manner of gathering information, and the needless misery involved in the pro-

cess, to say nothing of the affront which they inflicted on their own bodies.

This peculiar sect was not numerous in that region, but nevertheless was known well enough to the few inhabitants of the mountains; and some individuals of them were passably familiar to the eyes, because of their being constantly out of doors,—though never too far from places where a crust, or a bowl, might be had,—in all seasons idly and inoffensively wandering to and fro in pursuit of their intellectual pabulum.

But although these picturesque nomads excited no curiosity by their frequent appearances here and there, they were held to certain restrictions, and the chiefest of these was the one which forbade their trespassing on the acknowledged domain of the daughter of Hepsai. The path by which the fair vestal made her daily visits to the temple was held by the natives to be in a measure sacred, and was seldom, if ever, infringed upon by them; she was permitted to enjoy its solitude without interruption, except perhaps at long intervals, when the merest accident would give to some thoughtless wayfarer a glimpse of her presence there;—and so it came about that her personality was invested with the glamour of a mystery which was quite as effective as that which surrounded her in the temple.

Whether her immunity from observation, however, was due to a general feeling of reverential awe, attributable to her sacred calling, or whether it was caused by the more positive consideration of their physical integrity if they exposed themselves to the notice of the ever present leopard, it is difficult to say.

The gymnosophist was a trespasser; and being a trespasser, it was more than probable that he was a stranger.

At any rate, on beholding the leopard in his path, the

philosopher immediately threw up his hands and cried out:

"Ye pitiful gods! Save me!"

Hyla gave a low wail, and laid himself down on the ground in an easy posture for springing. Dahlymel went forward to meet the intruder.

"Sir," she said, "have no fear. If you refrain from any violent movement, and pay no attention to my servant, he will not harm you."

But the philosopher was as much amazed at the sudden appearance of the beautiful girl, as he was frightened by the presence of the leopard. His lips moved as though he would speak, but no sound came from them; it was a full minute before he could master his feelings sufficiently to enable him to say a word. With a great effort,—

"Beautiful spirit!" he faltered; and became dumb again.

Dahlymel was embarrassed; she knew not what to say.

Then the strange figure went down on its knees; the philosopher bowed his head to the ground before the vestal.

"Gracious goddess!" he murmured fervently; "vouchsafe forgiveness to thy unworthy slave, who hath inadvertently broken upon the holy sanctuary of thy blessed preference. I pray thee, overlook the impious but unintentional affront, and permit me to withdraw in safety from thy dazzling presence."

Dahlymel was so astonished by this demonstration that she stood speechless. The man was evidently overwhelmed with the conviction that he was in the presence of a supernatural being, and groveled at her feet oblivious to everything, except the possibility of some terrible vengeance being visited on his head because of the accident of his blundering.

Hyla watched him with grim fixedness, beating the ground with his tail as if his patience were overstrained.

Dahlymel perceived at once that immediate action was necessary, and she therefore called the leopard to her side; and when he came, half unwillingly, she attached the chain to his collar, and, leading him, led the way past the prostrate worshipper without uttering a word for his enlightenment.

Hyla sniffed at him as he passed;—whereat the philosopher groaned, and a shudder which spoke eloquently of griping fear, convulsed his body.

In another minute, the vestal and the leopard had passed beyond the next turning point in the path, and disappeared.

. . . . . .

Movis was in the gate when Dahlymel approached from the wood.

"Dear sister," he cried, taking instant alarm, "what has happened? Why do you return at this early hour? Have you seen our brother Carmyhl?"

"Carmyhl?" repeated Dahlymel stopping suddenly and putting her hand to her heart as a dreadful apprehension blanched her cheeks;—"Carmyhl? Has Carmyhl not returned?"

"Ah," responded Movis, "it is true, then!—something has happened of no slight moment, to keep our brother so late. The alarm must be given. Go you in to our mother at once, and help to calm her fears. That Carmyhl is safe enough, I feel assured; I apprehend nothing serious; I believe that he has become entangled in the almug swamps; before the night is fallen, we shall find him."

He gave a signal, in response to which half a dozen slaves came running to receive his commands. One of

them led away the leopard. Dahlymel, oppressed with foreboding, and a doubt which her brother's words could not dispel, hastened through the long passage to the inner court.

Movis then struck three blows upon a great gong which hung in a niche of the wall, whereat a dozen more slaves came hurrying from different directions and stood before him with their heads bent in attitudes of expectancy.

"Take arms and horses," said Movis, "and search the mountains for my brother. Four of you shall go to the Black Cavern and search the ground there, and the paths, and the woods; four shall ride with the utmost speed to the place of the almugs, and pass through every part of the dangerous swamp; in that place, you must go afoot, and be most rigid in your scrutiny. Four of you shall descend the eastern slope and thread the jungle; and four shall go to the river's bank and scrutinise the shore to the plain below. Be alert! Be swift! And do not fail to bring intelligence, even if your search extends through all the night."

Instant obedience followed. Horses were brought forth and accoutred, arms flashed in the sunlight, a hasty division of forces was made, and then with a whirl and a rush, the searchers streamed out from the wide enclosure and took their several ways up and down the mountain.

The day passed, and none of them returned.

As the evening fell, a pilgrim came to the gate and asked to be taken before the lord Hepsai; to whom, he said, he had a message of extraordinary import to deliver.

It was the same gymnosophist who had been surprised in the vestal's path that afternoon. Movis was disappointed when he learned from him that the important message had no bearing on the moving subject of Carmyhl's prolonged absence, but he nevertheless granted

the request, and sent a slave to conduct him to his father's presence.

Hepsai was in his chamber, seated at a table upon which rolls of scrip and various implements for writing were piled; he seemed distraught, and in no mood for considering the affairs which usually occupied his time; he was downcast, and deeply abstracted.

He looked up as the half-stark philosopher was ushered into the chamber, and absently bade him be seated on the divan which stood at a little distance from the table.

The stranger complied;—when the incongruousness of his appearance in the richly appointed chamber, had the immediate effect of dissipating the dismal reflections of the lord Hepsai, and of forcing him to regard his visitor with something akin to interest.

"Sir," he asked, "do you bring me tidings of my son?"

"Of your son, noble excellency? I know him not."

"Whence come you, then?"

"From the Imaus."

"From the mountains of that name merely?—or from the timid dwellers who abide there? They have of late been troublesome."

"From both. I crossed the mountains from the land beyond, charged with a sacred commission;—and questioned some of the murmurers I found there, concerning their futile struggles for liberty."

"You are a stranger, then?"

"Yes, most noble excellency; I am sent to you by the Patriarch of our sect."

"To what end?"

"That I may deliver to your noble excellency a verbal message of most cogent import."

"If it is so important, speak at once, I pray you;—and be brief."

"Noble sir, my instructions compel a narration of past events, but in so far as I may, I will be brief. The message I bring is from the holy and venerated Patriarch who is the father of the only true philosophy, and the guide whom we all, of his choosing, follow."

"Proceed;—I almost anticipate your message; but—but—proceed."

Thus urged, the philosopher passed one hand over his brow, and looking down, frowned upon the floor with an assumption of judicial gravity which had a ludicrous effect as expressed by such a figure. After a brief contemplation, he began like one reciting a narrative previously learned by heart:

"From the Cliff of the Crystals, which is on the southern face of Sariphi, of your mountains," he said, "a light can be seen at night a half an hundred leagues to the south; a light like a pale ribbon on the edge between the earth and heaven. The light is from the lamps in the great city of Prophthasia, the royal city which stands on the banks of the river of Hesydrus;—and the august king who sits in glory within its walls, Ahlmarath, the incomparable, is ruler over all the lands and peoples, from Magog to the islands of the sea.

"Of him, most noble excellency, the avenging spirit hath taken thought this day, and the fate of multitudes lies ready in the balance. Great Ahlmarath trembles upon his jeweled bed, and his servants cannot quiet his soul with incense, nor charm away his fears with music, nor distract his mind with dancing. He fears,—yet knows not what he fears. He is distressed,—yet knows not what distresses him. He implores the intervention of his gods,—but the gods mock at him.

"The cloud that hovers, is the cloud of judgment.

"In a day long past, the golden image of Belus was set

up in the chiefest temple of the royal city, and the former gods and their temples were overshadowed by the splendor of the new deity. The multitudes of the Indaprathea, of Nerissa, of Palibothra, of Gedrosia,—all fell before him and worshipped him.

"They sacrificed oxen upon his altars, as at this day, and once in every five years they sacrificed a virgin upon the great altar.

"The new god was insatiable. All beauty, all luxury, all power, were concentrated in the grasp of his supreme authority. His coffers were filled with the richest spoils of the wars, for the king himself gave tribute. From the king to the veriest slave, the god ruled over all; they called him the sovereign of the gods.

"He came as one descending from the sky. In the beginning, were two thousand priests robed in white linen and wreathed upon their brows with thya leaves and myrrh blossoms; they came out from the gates of the cities into the open places at midnight, with golden lamps burning before them; and descended the steps of the temples by the river of Hesydrus, and proclaimed him, Baal of the Egyptians, to be Belus, lord of the universe.

"Only these priests,—bound by oaths and self-interest, —knew the reason for that exaltation, and they throve upon their knowledge, and grew in power, and exercised vital prerogatives. They fattened on the gifts of the people, and gave to them in return, judgments, after the manner of the oracles of the Egyptians.

"The ministry of the priests became a ministry of devils.

"They grew to be over-luxurious; then licentious; then corrupt; then cruel.

"All but one;—who was called Muad, the wise; he was the chief priest of the innermost circle. He was regarded by the people with especial veneration, for his wisdom

was great and comprehensive. He was reserved of demeanor, and gentle of habit; he abjured all follies, and deprecated all license.

"On a day, Muad went out from the rest, secretly. He put off his sacred vesture, and the wreath of authority; he clothed himself in a garment of sadness, and put ashes upon his head.

"Secretly, he went into the vales of the mountains, and was hidden from the knowledge of men for a space; then visited the wilderness of the hills, and began to preach to the hardy dwellers there.

"He preached repudiation of the evil gods; and prophesied the final dethronement of the arch god Belus;—the downfall of the golden image; the destruction of that pitiless monster whose hands were strangling the souls of the people, and whose feet were crushing them into hopeless night.

"His listeners were eager and receptive, because they had thought themselves in an everlasting bondage to implacable fate, and because the links of the chain were exceeding cruel.

"They welcomed him with gladness; they hung upon his lips. And he promised them assuagement to their heavy griefs.

"He who had walked in the courts of alabaster where the fountains danced, and the fretted domes of crystal voiced again the sound of music; where the pillars of porphyry and agate gleamed through the smoke of incense, and the lovely sirens wandered amidst the splendor and charm of luxury;—he, the wise one, the gifted, the chosen of the proud,—was become an humble prophet, and spoke as a father to the children of the hills.

"But the priests of Belus were cunning. They sent

their spies into every crevice of the mountains, and searched every meadow.

"Muad was taken, as he slept in a fissure of the rocks and dreamed of the things he prophesied.

"They took him to his own temple in the grand city; and slew him upon the steps of the altar; and his blood splashed the feet of the offended deity.

"His name was erased from the tablets. Even his kin were sacrificed.

"But though he fell, his preaching had not been in vain; —not to the senseless trees, or to the unresponsive stones, had he spoken of the things he knew.

"The shepherds, the husbandmen, the humble workers in the upper slopes and the remote vallies,—all simple souls, living their uneventful and toilsome lives,—they had been his eager listeners; and they believed, and remembered well the teaching of the prophet.

"And now, most noble excellency, I come to the kernel of my message.

"Mark it well, for it is the substance of the prophecy, and the secret key to wonders which are most imminent.

"In the midnight hour for which they were to watch,—whether for a long, or for a little while, they could not know,—the star Vio would be eclipsed by Ra; and in the instant of the heavenly occultation a man-child would be born, who, upon his majority, would find a certain path whose following would lead to the emancipation of all peoples from their galling servitude. He would receive a sign; and the sign should be to all men, showing them the very god of gods;—a god of love instead of a god of cruelty,—a god of pity instead of a god delighting in oppression. And they watched faithfully.

"When Muad was slain, his followers were shocked with trembling fears; and were mute, refraining from

opening their lips concerning the wondrous hope which had been fostered in their hearts. But always, they watched.

"Day followed day; the seasons came, and passed again; the years dragged on. Years upon years, a weary cycle of years, passed away. The prophecy became a legend; it was whispered secretly from father to son for generations,—and still there was no occultation of the star Vio.

"But at last the tremendous event transpired. It is still remembered in the higher mountains, but its meaning has been discredited, and the eloquence of it become of no effect because there were no convulsions of the elements attending.

"The star was hidden, but only for a little while. Some said a cloud passed over it; some said it was not obscured at all, but that the too-credulous observers had lost it momentarily because of its infinite smallness and the close proximity to it of numberless other stars.

"Nevertheless, it was true. The occultation of Vio was accomplished,—*and a man-child was born while Vio was obscured.*

"So ends my mission. The venerable lord and master of the philosophers to whose honorable sect I belong, required of me that I impart this information in all secrecy to your most noble excellency; to you, alone, and to none other, was I to impart it;—and was commanded to say at the ending of the recital that the mystical eclipse occurred in the hour of midnight, thrice eight, and two years since; thrice eight, and two years, upon the hour of midnight, of the day of the Feast of Propitiation.

"Most noble excellency, your servant's task is finished."

Hepsai had risen from his seat some time before the conclusion of the singular message, and now stood, visibly agitated, his countenance almost as pale as the threads

of his beard. The jewels upon his breast scintillated with movement, and the golden circlets on his arms tinkled, as he stretched forth his hands in a gesture of thrilled amazement.

"The child!" he gasped; "What of the child?"

"Sir," answered the imperturbable gymnosophist, "I cannot tell you. My message carries with it its own light, and I have no other. The holy patriarch vouchsafes to his humble followers no explanations.—'Go you to the mountains of the Paropamissus,' he said,—'to the southern slope of the mountain of Sariphi, where a wondrous thing has come to pass. Search in the gardens for the lord Hepsai, and to him, give my message. Whisper it to no one else. Say to him that Ra and Vio met when a child was born in fulfillment of the prophecy; say this, and he will understand.' "

"My understanding wakes, indeed," said Hepsai, starting a pace, as though at the very moment he realised a fact of vital and overwhelming importance;—"the child is mine! 'Tis Carmyhl, my son, who was born at midnight, when the stars came together!"

CHAPTER X

THE impassioned declaration of the lord Hepsai surprised the gaunt philosopher out of his accustomed dullness.

He arose from his seat and stared. He presented the aspect of one who, having imparted intelligence to which he had given but indifferent credence himself, all at once perceives that there is something in it of truth and moment. His jaw dropped; he was astonished to observe the effect which his message had produced, and more so to hear the words elicited by what he had believed to be a merely mystifying tale whose meaning was safely veiled to his incurious mind.

"And your son, most noble excellency," he said; "where is he?"

"Oh, Carmyhl, Carmyhl," exclaimed Hepsai, not heeding, and apparently unconscious of, the philosopher's presence; "have the gods taken you? Is this the meaning of your long absence? 'Tis cruel! Great Alpleh, why hast thou blinded mine eyes? Isyl, thou intimate and fondly fostered guardian of my house, why hast thou kept me ignorant?—'Tis cruel!—cruel!"

He turned suddenly on his visitor.

"Know you nothing else?" he asked.

"Nothing else, noble excellency," was the reply.

"And you tell me that the gods are false?"

"There are false gods, and true gods."

"And which, I pray you, is the true god?"

"Sir," answered the philosopher, "it would be pre-

sumption on my part to discriminate amongst them. The followers of my creed take no thought of the differing claims which the gods make upon us. To the earth, and the things which live upon it, we pay homage. The trees speak to us, the waters admonish us;—from the throats of the birds we gather knowledge, and from the ways of the beasts, wisdom. The sky also, we adore; to the sky, and to the things which glorify it, we pay homage. The stars advise us, the moon gives us discipline; from the warmth of the sun we derive life, and from the clouds, warning. We have also our intimate gods, which we worship as our fathers did, for the propitiation of things spiritual, and things hoped for. The false gods are they which speak with oracles, and confuse the mind."

"Whence, then, this oracle which you have rendered to me?"

" 'Tis not an oracle, but a message of signal importance from the lips of age and wisdom. Its purpose I cannot fathom, for I was not permitted understanding."

After a short pause,—

"Who guided you hither?" asked Hepsai, abstractedly.

"The most holy and beautiful of the goddesses!" answered the philosopher easily, speaking as one who had been favored by some special act of the gods' beneficence, but who was thoroughly accustomed to the wonders of heavenly intercourse; "I was in meditation where the wood was dense, and suddenly the glorious spirit shone from empty space and filled my pathway with light. 'Twas like a rose, and ethereal. It was a living soul in the form of a woman, at the first, but its loveliness and mystery was such that I was fain to fall upon my face. An attendant slave in the form of a golden butterfly guarded her; its aspect was so terrible that my heart quivered; I was overcome by it, and would have died there. But the

gracious deity called it away, saying—'Come, Hyla!' and then they both vanished."

Hepsai frowned; the statement created doubts in his mind.

" 'Twas one of the daughters of Belus, mayhap," said the pilgrim, reflectively.

"It was my own daughter whom you saw,—a vestal in the holy temple," said Hepsai;—"and the slave was her constant companion,—a noble leopard."

"Nevertheless," continued the philosopher, unabashed, "it was a spirit from celestial regions. In the semblance of your daughter, perhaps,—wearing a mortal's guise lest the splendor of her own ineffable self had slain me. As it was, I did but look, and sank powerless."

At this moment there was a commotion without, and immediately a tall figure entered the chamber in great perturbation; it was Mithreb.

"Father!" he cried, not observing the presence of a stranger at first; "they tell me that my brother has not returned. Is it so? Have you heard aught?"

"My son," answered Hepsai, surprised, "what brings you here, out of season? Is it well, at the temple?"

"Something untoward has happened there, but of what complexion, I know not. The priest Sahlmug, who stood at the gate of the inner circle, is fallen ill, 'tis whispered, and his malady is shared by the chief priest who abides in the secret chambers. The vestals are much perturbed; my fellows are oppressed with a vague apprehension. For this reason, my father, I am commanded to withdraw myself for a day and a night. Tell me, then:—what of Carmyhl?"

"I know not," said Hepsai, pressing his hand upon his brow, distractedly; "there have come no tidings."

"He is lost, then!" cried Mithreb, impulsively; "lost to

us forever,—sacrificed to our idle whims of yesterday! Ah, father, remember where we sent him;—*to the devil's cavern.* He has fallen, there; he has been swallowed up."

"Hush!—it cannot be. His horse was far from its brink, and no signs are there to show that he ventured near it."

Then the philosopher spoke; evidently, he was now convinced of the pregnant meaning which his message had contained, though he marveled inwardly.

"Most gracious sir," he said, rising from his seat and addressing the priest; "I perceive from your habiliments that you are a ministrant before the great god Alpleh. Know, therefore, that the puissant gods in council have decreed a peculiar and sacred task to be laid on the child of prophecy,—that brother of whom you speak. Rest in peace. They will care for him."

Mithreb drew back, on discovering the stranger; hitherto, a fold of drapery had concealed him.

"What do you say?" he asked; "of what council do you speak?"

"The council which is held at times in the spheres beyond the sky, by the omniscient gods of the august triad: the Beneficent; the Avenger; the Conservator;—who make the decrees for the lesser gods, and for men;—who have judged even Belus, and have meted out his portion."

"You are mystical. Simplicity would become you best, as being in closer accord with your tenets. I pray you, speak plainly, if you know aught of my brother."

"Doubtless your brother lives, and is sequestered for a purpose."

"Do you say 'doubtless'? You do not know, then;—and are still mystical."

The philosopher was apparently unwilling to confess

his ignorance in this most perplexing matter, and replied evasively:

"I am forbidden to be more plain. Suffice it, that your brother is destined to a glorious achievement. The gods have so willed it, and have sent me to proclaim it."

"And will your wisdom deign to impart the nature of this extraordinary enterprise?" asked the priest disdainfully.

The philosopher was unmoved.

"I dare not;" he said.

Mithreb's eyes blazed.

"Gods, restrain me!" he cried, with a fierce gesture;—and went out from the chamber immediately.

The patience of Hepsai was exhausted also, and he said to the pilgrim, somewhat ungraciously:

"Sir, if your mission is accomplished, I pray you to withdraw. Take no offense, but rather have consideration for the state of miserable suspense and uncertainty into which I am plunged this day. The secret of your mission shall be respected, but it is necessary that you withdraw at once. Not only from this place, but from these mountains, where my son is much loved, and where intelligence of your singular complicity in his affairs will surely cause you to be in imminent danger of suspicion, and possibly of violence. For two days, and two nights, you will be safe; afterwards, 'tis as you will. Convey to your venerable Patriarch my bitterest thanks; and say to him that Hepsai's dreams of late have been touched by the warning of the prophecy. Say that Hepsai is childless,—for Carmyhl was my chiefest joy."

He made a sign to the slaves who stood like images of ebony behind his chair, whereupon two detached themselves from the rest, and the philosopher was conducted by them from the chamber and set down to a very wel-

come and bountiful repast in one of the lodges by the gate.

The poor traveler was waited upon with every mark of respect for his calling, and although he refused the blandishments of meat and wine, he nevertheless fortified himself strongly with the bread and fruits, against a possible siege of hunger while hastening away from that too luxurious region.

The slaves then conducted him by a circuitous path to the margin of the river, where a boat was fastened amongst the rushes; entering which, the river was crossed, and a landing made at a considerable distance below the widely spreading meadows of the House of Hepsai.

Here, the gymnosophist was proffered a small purse of gold, which he gently but firmly declined; and folding his arms crossed his breast in his customary manner, began at once, though without haste, his exodus from the valley of the Hesydrus.

CHAPTER XI

THREE months passed away, and yet no tidings of the absent Carmyhl came to the House of Hepsai.

The most diligent search, the most strenuous efforts, to solve the mystery of his quick and utter evanishment, came to nought; the villagers who were recreating themselves on the evening of his passing by them, remembered only the gayety of his greetings to them, and the grace and freedom of his horsemanship; they had seen him coming like the harbinger of the evening wind, and watched him going, as he faded in the sunset.

The House of Hepsai was hung with purple, to denote the mourning of its inconsolable occupants. On the outer walls, and upon the porch, heavy masses of purple silk were folded and draped in funereal continuity, from the ground to the shelving eaves; the image of the god Isyl was heavily swathed in purple..

The hours and the days dragged gloomily, in an atmosphere of miserable and torturing suspense; and even the gladness of the sunlight was eclipsed, by the heavy shadow of a bitter and seemingly endless night.

Upon a day in the beginning of the fourth month of their bereavement, Phyloprase and Shalzamene sat by the river's edge together, on the platform of the water-gate at the foot of the garden meadow.

The river glanced in the splendor of the sunlight, but to them, it was a frozen stream without a sound of music.

The lotuses and the lilies of gold seemed to be hovering as butterflies, above the limpid crystal that reflected them so perfectly and gently tossed them on its fairy ripples;

the jasmine hung in the arbored branches like snow-flakes intercepted; and the honeysuckles lighted the depths of shade with their scarlet clusters;—yet to the mourning sisters, the lotuses were vague and formless, the lilies dull, the jasmine but a rift of melancholy gray, and the honeysuckles void of attractiveness, their brilliancy unmarked, and their subtle perfume lifeless.

Both Phyloprase and Shalzamene were clothed in purple.

The silken filaments of their abundant dark hair were loosely drawn back from their brows, and being fastened by crescent-like fillets of amethysts, flowed from thence downward in disorder.

Their robes were simple; the gauzy and lustreless folds were confined at their waists by slender girdles of amethysts; with the exception of the girdles and the fillets of precious jewels, they were wholly unadorned, yet presented, by reason of their own personal beauty, a picture of exceeding elegance.

A fixed expression of sadness had come to their faces, and their eyes no longer sparkled with the animation which had once been the greatest charm in their personality; the chatelaine was perhaps a shade more markedly disconsolate than the poetess, but the latter's sorrow was none the less sincere from being more openly expressive.

They wept in silence, at times, and at times conversed on the one theme which absorbed them both,—as it absorbed in almost the same degree, each individual of the House of Hepsai, from the lowest menial slave to the lord governor himself.

" 'Twas I, who sent him to that dreadful place;" said Phyloprase, in continuance of a conversation whose tenor was ever the same;—she was constant in self-reproach.

" No, dear sister, do not say so," protested Shalzamene;

"it was but chance,—the whim of circumstance,—which marred the happy day. And yet, dear sister, if you will but think a moment on our idle words, you will perceive at once how unjust it is to yourself to accuse a suggestion lightly made of bringing this heavy sorrow upon us. For the vigil in the mountains where the caverns lie, was but a harmless lesson, which was meant to teach impatience to be patient.

"There is nothing of danger there; to our dear lost brother, the rocky desert was familiar, and the trees of the forest unembarrassing. No;—'twas not that you had sent him *there,* dear sister,—but 'twas I, who thoughtlessly asked of him a fawn, and a branch of almug blossoms. He fretted at the simple task you set him, and undertook the dangerous one which my unhappy tongue had syllabled. 'Tis but an hour's ride from the caverns, to that fatal morass where the vipers swarm beneath the almug trees.

"And the ground is cruelly unstable there, drawing down the lighest object, and covering it more deeply than could the dry and burning quicksands that abound in all that region. Alas, alas,—my heart misgave me afterwards."

"But, sister," answered Phyloprase," you must not reproach yourself; for indeed, the dangers you speak of are too easily avoided to make your apprehensions reasonable. The blossoms of the almug can be gathered easily, because the trees are rooted in the firm ground which surrounds the swamp, and not in the miry instability of its midst. The serpents shun the water, and the quicksands are far beyond it; as for the fawn, one might be taken from the meadows, almost without an effort.

"No, dear sister,—it is I, who am in fault.

"For consider: the Black Cavern is a frightful crevice

of the mountain, and it is fathomlessly deep. There was no moon upon that night, until 'twas midnight; the mountain was clothed in blackness, and the trees of the forest made a horrible gloom. Dear Carmyhl, weary of his vigil, sought relief by walking to and fro,—where the shrouded pit——where——ah, Isyl! Isyl!"——and she fell to weeping passionately.

Shalzamene caressed her soothingly, yet herself was weeping, as the probability of the awful conjecture grew in vividness in her sympathetic mind.

While they mourned, a ray of hope was coming.

Out on the river, a sparkle of many colors, and a musical, rhythmic sound, indicated the swift approach of some vessel propelled by oars;—and in a few minutes, gliding up the stream from the shimmering vistas out of which it had emerged, a beautiful gilded barge appeared, manned by twenty slaves gorgeously turbaned, and cinctured in brown and yellow silk.

An awning of blue silk was spread above the stern, with curtains folded back and revealing a high and luxurious couch sumptuously bedizened. A handsome young man wearing a long tunic of white silk, belted with brown leather, sat upon the couch, half reclining.

As the barge neared the platform, the youth sprang up and became at once animate and expectant.

His figure was lithe and elegant, and his face beautiful and grave; his hair was short, dark, and crisp, inclining to curl slightly; his eyes were also dark, and earnest in expression, being of the kind which show a touch of hazel in moments of tranquility, and deepen to indigo when excited or impassioned. He wore a kind of fez of white silk, from the peak of which a wide tassel of pearls and rubies fell down behind, and a short sword in a scabbard

of burnished silver, was attached by silver chains to his girdle.

The oarsmen, guided by their leader, brought the boat with an exquisite precision to the edge of the great stone slab of the platform; and stopped there without chafing it, and with no other confusion than that which was necessarily created in the swirls and ripples of the suddenly invaded water. The young man stepped upon the platform, spoke a few words to the slaves, and then approached the trellis-gate; while the barge glided away again to a point in the middle of the river, where evidently it was anchored, and held for further commands.

The sisters had overcome the stress of their mutual grief by the time their visitor had left the barge, and now arose to greet him, their eyes showing kindly welcome, though their lips were incapable of smiling. The new comer regarded them with every aspect of profound astonishment.

Phyloprase was the first to speak.

"Prince Candase", she said, "you are welcome. It is long, since you have visited our house."

"Most gracious ladies," replied the prince, "I come on the laggard opportunity, to greet you; but am overwhelmed by what I see, and am afraid to ask what sorrow has befallen. For a long while,—three months, and more, —my father the king has held me close to my exercises with his favorite cataphracts, deeming it best that I should make myself proficient under their guidance rather than study the subtler matters of the government policy. I had no opportunity even to send a messenger, to inquire regarding your felicity;—but now that I have come myself,—and find you,—thus,—I am afraid to ask."

"Is our brother Shoza well, dear prince?" asked Phylo-

prase, who found it too hard a task to speak at once of the grief which shadowed everything.

"Shoza is well," he answered, "but his spirit seems very wonderfully changed. He no longer laughs when his comrades are merry, and he no longer sings when they importune him. Shoza is not sad,—if sadness be a form of melancholy,—but rather Shoza is distracted by some secret and gnawing grief, which wears a semblance of rage, indifferently restrained. To questionings, he replies —*'Do not ask;—the time for weeding is near!'*—He is at present the riddle of the company."

"And did he,—did he speak—" began Shalzamene, but stopped abruptly, the tears overflowing in her eyes.

"He spoke of Mithreb," said Candase, restraining his alarms; "but in so mystical a way that none could understand. *'The gods have snared my brother'*, he said, *'but of me they took no account. Let them be wary. A priest the less will give a cataphract his opportunity."*— We cannot solve his meaning."

"Oh, Candase!" said Phyloprase; "since you were here, a dreadful thing has befallen;—"

"Do not tell me, I pray you!—Not yet;—not now;" he interrupted, his face paling, and his whole body quivering as with an unspeakable dread. He put his hands to his brow and walked away a little distance, striving against some powerful emotion. Then looking up,—"You gods who assuage the stings of death," he cried, "support my soul!"

Shalzamene looked at her sister; they both understood.

"Dahlymel lives," said Phyloprase.

The prince trembled visibly, and a great sigh escaped his lips. Then he approached the sisters, and falling on one knee before them, bowed his head and remained so until the stress of his feelings was relaxed. They looked

down upon him with an expression of tender sympathy, but said nothing, because silence was the more eloquent.

Presently Candase arose, yet miserably anticipative.

"'Tis Carmyhl, for whom you mourn?" he said.

"Yes, dear prince," answered Phyloprase; "it is for Carmyhl that we wear these robes of sorrow; it is for Carmyhl that the House of Hepsai is draped in mourning; it is for Carmyhl that our sacred Isyl mourns."

"Carmyhl?—Dead?"

"We fear it; we believe it; we cannot doubt it."

"You do not know it?—of a surety?"

Then Shalzamene related falteringly what had occurred on the day of the Feast of Propitiation.

Candase listened attentively, and at the conclusion of the narrative, which recited also the events of several days following, he was inclined to join the sisters in their reasonable belief that a fatal accident had happened. Nevertheless, after considering the matter more deeply, he ventured to say that he believed a possibility existed, in spite of circumstances, that Carmyhl was yet alive.

The sisters were startled; but to their eager questionings, the prince explained that the fraternity of robbers known to a vast extent of that country as the *Vultures,* and banded together under the leadership of a reputed ostracised prince who called himself the *White Vulture,* were wont, in the furtherance of some of their schemes, to seize the person of some especially promising notable, and to hold him for a season in their secret fastness before publishing terms for his ransom.

Also, that in some inexplicable manner, the Black Cavern had become associated in the minds of the people with the dreaded name of the Vultures, whose many depredations had, in the people's opinion, some vague connection with the supernatural terrors of the awful chasm.

The joining of those two differing evils in one perplexing mystery, served only to augment them both, and the Vultures profited by the fear engendered.

Nothing, therefore, could be more plausible than a belief in Carmyhl's abduction by the Vultures;—the superstitious fear of whom, by the people, constituted a most efficient shield for the robbers, and even invited them to deeds of peculiar audacity.

The young prince concluded by saying that he would instantly, on his return to the City, put extraordinary forces at work in the prosecution of a speedy rescue.

Involuntarily, the sisters embraced one another, while their eyes shone with a sudden, hopeful light.

"Oh, that this might be!" they exclaimed,—then wept again; then made some new conjecture,—and were agitated by the importunities of a growing and brightening hope.

The prince, meanwhile, was regarding them wistfully; he wished to ask a question, but his diffidence prevented. Finally, achieving courage, he inquired if Dahlymel were well; adding excusingly, that hitherto she had always been with them at that hour.

"She is well," answered Phyloprase hesitatingly; "but the exigencies of the temple of late, have made it necessary for her to remain there in close seclusion. We have not seen her in many days, and even our brother Mithreb, who was to have visited us yesterday, made no appearance, and sent no message. We fear the gods are angry; yet for what reason they should be angry, we do not know;—only vague whispers have come to us."

"The gods are angry, you say? A fig for their anger! I will propitiate them with a gift. But have there been exigencies in the temple at any other time before this? Was ever our vestal restrained because of them?"

"Never before. But since the feast day, which was so happy, all has gone amiss. Alas, a cloud has fallen on our house!"

"The cloud shall be dispersed. I will rend it; I will speak to Shoza, and if needs be I will exact power from my father. It is intolerable that the most precious jewel of all the fair virgins of the altar should be disciplined because the whims of plotting priests have so decreed. I cannot bear it;—I will not bear it."

"And yet our loved sister belongs to Alpleh."

"I will break his wings!" exclaimed Candase angrily; "The rascal god is impertinent. What! My beautiful one belong to him?—never! She is mine, in all verity; and the days of my waiting before I could justly claim her from the temple, came to an end but three days since. I am come to tell her of my love;—for before this, 'twould have been sacrilege to whisper it."

The sisters shrank a little, on hearing the epithet bestowed on the puissant god of the mountains.

"Candase!" they cried, partly in fear, but more in amazement; "the gods will hear you,—perhaps punish you!"

"Gracious ladies," replied the prince," nothing is less likely. The gods only listen when 'tis profitable for them to do so, and they only punish when 'tis needless. Profit is a tangible thing to them, but the pressure of need excites their cruelty."

"Oh, prince, you make us tremble! 'Tis but a moment since, you called upon the gods to sustain you."

"I have caught the trick from older men, I fear," he replied with a smile; "it seems a part of one's nature to appeal to the gods when one's own resources are at fault, but ordinarily one's own judgment and perspicacity are sufficient. In the courts, no man believes the gods to be

infallible, and none are moved by the things which are deemed by others to be mysterious and profound. All my brothers hold this opinion secretly, but 'tis the fashion of the world to worship *something*."

"You grieve us, Candase," said Phyloprase, reprovingly.

"I pray you, forgive me," he answered; "and consider justly:—what can the gods do for us,—what do they accomplish for us,—that we could not achieve as well, and that we do not compass better and more expeditiously without their intervention?"

"They give us life, and health, and peace; they watch over us, and protect us; they lead us safely;—but their ways being different from ours, as their wisdom is greater, and their love more comprehensive, we sometimes mistake our reverses for marks of their displeasure, and disappointments for proofs of their inattention. The truth being, that we are merely subjected to trials, for the sake of our ultimate and supreme happiness."

"It is a pleasant creed, and I willingly acknowledge its manifold beauties. I am afraid, however, that the shallow artificialities, no less than the studied cynicism of the majority of the priests with whom I have come in contact about the palace, have robbed me of belief in anything which is not palpable to the eye or to the touch. I cannot see the interposition of a god when I am in momentary straits, but I can both see and feel the manner and mode of my escape from them by merely helping myself. And so it shall be in our present state of deprivation. I must go myself to claim my treasure."

"Oh, Candase!—let us first go up and beseech Isyl to show our hearts the way we should follow."

"But, dear sisters,—for I will call you so henceforth,—you have doubtless appealed before this, to the son of

Alpleh to lift the veil of doubt and fear from the cause of Carmyhl's absence—and have received no answer. In my opinion, there could be no answer from such a source; for I confess I am sceptical to a degree,—my scepticism having grown from constant observation until the glorious fabric which filled the garden of my soul when I was a child has become so attenuated, so unsubstantial, so dream-like, that I no longer recognise its existence.

"It will be folly to appeal to Alpleh himself, the very god of the mountains; and yet, because of custom, and of a certain indefinable something within me which craves for spiritual knowledge, and possibly for spiritual help,—if such things really are,—I will invoke the oracle of the temple, and make my supplication there, before I resort to other and more potent measures."

"You are vehement, prince," said Phyloprase, with some deprecation in her tone; "the gods are all-powerful, and Alpleh, especially, is masterful and not to be gainsaid. I beseech you, be patient for yet a little while, lest evil come from a too-fervent importunity."

"I will wait until to-morrow," said Candase; "and though my heart rebels against procrastination, I will hold my fears in subjection for your sakes, until then. Perhaps Dahlymel will come from thence by to-morrow."

"I will pray to Isyl to let her come," said Shalzamene; "before the sun is set, I will invoke Isyl."

"If Isyl has a spark of amiability, he will let her come."

"And Mithreb, too," said Phyloprase.

"And Carmyhl," added Candase.

They began forthwith to hope for light on the dark enigmas which confronted them; even Candase, with all his prejudices against the efficiency of the gods' reputed power, began to hope for light.

While they were conversing, each striving to encour-

age the other, Hepsai came down through the garden meadow and joined them. He was clad in purple, and a look of profound melancholy shadowed his features; he moved slowly, and had lost the vigorous action and the genial affability of the time when sorrow was an unknown factor in his house. He greeted the prince without smiling, yet not without his habitual kindliness.

"I am pleased to witness the renewal of your visits," he said; "and hope that the chill of our misfortune will not prove over-severe for their continuance.—My lord the king is well?—and your brothers also?"

"Alas, gracious sir," answered Candase; "I cannot give you the pleasant tidings you anticipate. My dear father, though in seeming health, is nevertheless overburdened with care, and at many times is so distraught,—fearing the imminence of some nameless evil, and dismayed often by what appear to be the trivialest occurrences in the remoter parts of the kingdom,—that the lords provident are in much distress; not understanding, and not knowing, whither the malady may tend.

"As for my brothers, they are well. Too well,—if I may whisper a secret which is none too closely kept in the courts."

"Too well? You alarm me."

"My elder brother is ambitious," Candase explained; "and he asserts himself offensively in matters with which only the king may deal. And the seven others are like him, with a difference; they each have their following; they each begin to murmur against the bounds which define the scope and character of their license.

"Lest you should marvel at the implied superiority to temptation which my own case would seem to present, it is only necessary, in order to retain your good opinion, to remind you that I am the youngest of the king's family,

and, therefore, of not sufficient consequence to tempt the advances of the ambitious. Besides which,—I love my father, and am content."

"I am glad to hear such words," said Hepsai; "and appreciate the meaning of them more keenly, as I recall the subtle glamours and the almost irresistible fascinations which beset the ways of youth in the great city. I know them. I know the corruption which reeks under the silk and crystal; I know the wickedness which is veiled amidst flowers; and though I have marveled often at your seeming escape from those evil influences, it is pleasant to hear your assurance of their ineffectuality with you. But tell me, pray,—of what complexion are the fears which agitate my lord the king?"

" 'Tis difficult to resolve them under one complexion," answered Candase; "because they are so various, and generally so vague and unintelligible. One of them relates in some manner to the powers and prerogatives of the gods, but I do not know the nature of that relation. Another fear is inspired by the vagaries of a certain preacher of Arabis, who is inimical to the ways of the temples, and deficient in reverence for the gods;—it is but four days since, that he was said to have spoken with an assumed equality with the divine Belus himself. My father was greatly perturbed when the meaningless intelligence was brought to him, receiving it with heavy sighs, and retiring at once to his chamber, denying himself to all."

Much to the prince's astonishment, Hepsai stretched out his hands, and looking upward, exclaimed:

"You gods! What is coming?"

His emotion was only momentary, however.

"And what else, Candase?" he asked.

"There is nothing else, gracious sir, except the celebration which impends. That is the only other subject of

importance talked of in the City,—the forthcoming Festival of the Presentation, which occurs once in every two years. Great and magnificent preparations are making."

" 'Tis said of the last celebration that it lacked sincerity," said Phyloprase; "and that it proved to be sadly inadequate to the needs of the temples when the time of distribution was come. Do you fear a repetition of that indifference?"

"No. The preparations now making are of such an extraordinary character that a universal interest will be created by them. And not only interest, but a great enthusiasm; the spectacle will be a gorgeous one, outrivaling the most splendid of its predecessors."

At this juncture, a slave came down from the house and prostrated himself before Hepsai. Rising, he said:

"Most gracious lord, there is a pilgrim at the gate who craves an audience."

"A pilgrim?" said the governor; "of what sect, or consequence?"

"Of the sect of the Imaus, lord, and in consequence, a shrouded novice."

"Ha! the wind is stirring. Let the pilgrim wait, and I will come."

CHAPTER XII

"SIR," said the prince, when the slave had departed, "I am curious to meet with one of these philosophers, and beg permission to accompany you. The unwashed and scantily clothed gymnosophists are familiar to my eyes from their obtrusive and uncouth appearances in places where their presence is the least desirable; but these hooded devotees who veil their very faces from the eyes of men, are a rarer sight, and belong to a different order of the species. Besides which, I have heard strange tales of them recently, hinting at something diabolical and calamitous."

" 'Tis said they know the language of the stars," said Shalzamene; "and that they are capable of divining secrets."

"If their divinations are as abstruse as those of the oracles," said Candase, "a guess at the nature of a secret will suffice;—'tis but the opposition of one intangibility to another."

"Perhaps he bears a message," said Phyloprase; "a message from—from—"

"Carmyhl!" exclaimed Shalzamene, interrupting; "Oh, let us all go up; let us hasten!"

Accordingly, as the suggestion awoke a stirring hope in their breasts, Hepsai, with his daughters and the prince, left the riverside at once, and passed up through the garden. Arriving at the house, they seated themselves in the court, and the pilgrim was brought before them.

The pilgrim was a man whose age could not be surmised, beyond the probability that he was not old. He ap-

peared to be slender, was of a good height, and had the mien of one versed in the polite arts. He was clothed from head to foot in a kind of gold-colored serge, only his eyes showing vaguely, through a curiously contrived interstice in the cloth, and his bare feet, sandaled with leather, appearing beneath the garment when he walked.

He made a profound obeisance to the lord governor, and at the conclusion of it presented him with a folded script; saying, in a low and very deliberate, though partially muffled, voice,—

"Most gracious lord, I am deputed by one whom your noble excellency will doubtless be pleased to hear from, to give into your hands this writing, explanatory of certain grave matters pertaining to the House of Hepsai."

The governor had no sooner opened the missive, than he rose up from his chair with an exclamation of pleasure.

"The gods be thanked!" he said; " 'tis from Carmyhl."

"Oh, father!" exclaimed the sisters together, their eyes sparkling with unwonted lustre; "Read!—Read!"

The prince was also excited, and stood up, expectant.

Hepsai then read the letter:

"Most dearly loved,—my father, my mother, my brothers, and my sisters,—to each one, tender greetings! This is from your Carmyhl, whose long absence has been involuntary, and whose silence has been from necessity. The manner of my leaving you, I can only touch upon briefly. In the vigil of that pregnant night, I was oppressed by the dullness of inaction, and sought relief in walking to and fro by the cavern. It was very dark there, and the solitude was wearisome. At the hour of midnight, I saw a vision of peculiar import, and was betrayed by it into following where it led. It led me into captivity, and I was restrained for many days. Of physical harm, I have received none; in all respects I am well and strong.

"But it is forbidden me to return to the joys of my home, to the blessings of your company, to the pursuits I had anticipated following, and to the tranquility of the life I have known with you. Henceforth, my way is a crooked one, and its limitations are unmarked until the revealing hour of its ending. Then I will return to you.

"It is not possible for any man to set the time for the lifting up of my soul, yet I am confident of that exaltation. To the time of its coming, all things, with me, shall be contributive and hastening; to it, all else shall be sacrificed. For I am persuaded of some nameless glory, in the dawn of which I am surely to participate;—of some signal and precious revelation whose import will be made plain to me;—of some wonderful change in the order of things, which will rend the shadows from the earth and let the light so shine as to rekindle hopes that smouldered in despair.

"More, I cannot say. The bearer of this will assure you of my well-being, and, within a necessary limit, will answer for me to your questioning.

"In all love and constancy, now and always.

"CARMYHL."

On the conclusion of the reading, Hepsai addressed the pilgrim.

"Sir," he said, "by what name are you called?"

"Noble excellency, we go by numbers, and therefore am I nameless;—yet, call me Phral."

"Phral?—That means *the beginning*. The beginning of what, I pray you? Not of trouble?—or of long waiting?"

"The beginning of his messages to you. They will of necessity be scant, and wide apart."

"And can you tell us nothing of the time of his return to us?"

"His return depends wholly on the termination of his quest."

"His quest? I pray you, what is that?"

"It is a secret. Nevertheless, the gods might tell you."

"You know my Carmyhl well?"

"He is my dearest friend."

"Then he has sent an invocation by you to his loved god, Isyl."

"On the contrary, he beseeches you to have no faith in Isyl."

"What!—is this my son, my favorite, my hope,—and is he changed to infidelity? Tell me at least, that he is steadfast to Alpleh."

"To the altar of Alpleh, the god of the mountains, he prays you will go on the morrow, and ask of the oracle the reason and explanation of the things which disquiet you. He prays you will first ask Isyl,—and then the oracle."

"But Isyl is estranged from us; and will not be propitiated, because of his vestal's absence."

"The vestal is—"

"My daughter,—who is restrained at the temple. The gods require her there."

The pilgrim stood up.

"It is a vital part of my mission," he said, "that I bring good tidings to your son of his sister's welfare. He enjoined me particularly, regarding the vestal; that I should assure her of his safety and remembrance; that I should see her with my own eyes, and be convinced of her felicity. What shall I say to him?"

"Say that her sacred calling shields her; that she is well; that her happiness is unclouded while she ministers to the god of her people and of her house."

"And what of the priest, his brother?"

"He, also, is restrained. There is some mystery toward; but the gods have been very gracious, and we fear no evil."

The pilgrim folded his arms with a gesture of impatience.

"I bring you water to quench the fires of your mourning," he said, "but you would send me away with ashes on my lips. I cannot carry tidings such as these; Carmyhl will not accept them."

"You are imperious," said Hepsai, rising; "the message we intrust to you is the message you shall carry safely to my son."

"I will not take it," said the pilgrim.

The lord governor was amazed; he was unused to opposition.

"Sir," he said, with rising anger, "you are overzealous. My son's ambassador should respect the power to which he is accredited."

"Most noble excellency," Phral replied, "I crave your patience. Be not offended with your servant because he is faithful to the trust which has been imposed upon him. Of a surety, I am constrained to accept no evil tidings from the House of Hepsai, unless they are in their nature past remedy, or beyond the reach of assuagement. Death, only, is without remedy; but the evils of circumstance may be mitigated."

"But I repeat," said Hepsai, with vehemence; "there are no evils. My son and daughter exercise their functions without undue severity. It is true, we are deprived of their company at the present, but the reason for that is, because the stress of sacred obligations weighs more heavily than usual, and is become more exacting, on the vestals and the priests alike. Is it not clear to you by this, that all is well with the brother and sister who serve great Alpleh? What would you have?"

"Gracious lord,—a concession to Carmyhl's desire, and to the urgency of my mission. Your servant asks that you

give him conduct to the temple, armed with the potent signet of your authority."

" 'Twould be an affront to the deity;—the gods are sensitive."

"Nevertheless," persisted the pilgrim, "I must behold and speak with the prisoners of the temple. The sister of Carmyhl is deprived of her liberty without a proven cause, and Mithreb the priest is held in like endurance. Therefore I pray you, noble sir, consider;—what shall I say to Carmyhl?"

The patience of Hepsai was fast ebbing away.

"Say to Carmyhl that you found his father's house draped in mourning, because we believed him dead," he answered; "—say that his script relieved our hearts of the sting of a bitter anguish;—say that his father knows the nature of his quest, and that he trembles for his safety,—trembles because of his audacity. Say that the purple is rent from the walls of the house, and that we, knowing that he lives, will wait in peace, and welcome him with gladness on his return to us. Say that the shield of the gods will protect us;—and tell him," he continued with emphasis, "to send us, when his affair shall warrant, a less insistent, and a more amiable ambassador."

"Gracious lord," said the pilgrim, imperturbably, "what of the vestal?—what of the priest? I am commanded to see them; and to take from their lips, a message of assurance."

"What! Is my son become a king, that he *commands?*"

"To me, he is a king. For him, I bear all, undertake all, and will endure all."

"By the gods! you shall endure unveiling!" exclaimed Hepsai in great anger;—"Let us see the countenance of our masking embassy;"—and he strode a step forward

with his hands uplifted as if to rend the garment from the head of the pilgrim.

Phral started back, moving quickly to a distance and making a warning gesture with his arm.

"Honored lord," he said hurriedly and earnestly, "beware!—beware, I implore you! A touch upon the vesture of my head means instant death;—the cloth's envenomed! I pray you, be appeased;—and give me conduct to the temple, armed with your signet."

The lord governor seemed not to hear him; he was furious.

Turning quickly to the dais whereon the table was placed, he struck a note upon a silver disc which hung by the chair he had occupied. As the loud vibrations leaped from the sounding metal, a number of slaves ran out from a curtained alcove and knelt to receive his commands.

"Stayh!" said the governor, addressing the most powerful of his servants; "tear the mask from yonder man, but do him no injury. At once! and effectually."

The mask of the pilgrim was merely a continuation of the folds of his garment; but from the shoulders upward, the gold-colored serge was marked in a singular manner with strange looking hieroglyphics; they were intensely black, were closely involved, and had a shining appearance, as though wet.

The slave advanced boldly, and seized the mystic hood; —and paused, transfixed in the act.

He trembled, and fell to the ground, writhing and convulsed. In a moment, his limbs stiffened, and he lay on his back like a log,—dead.

The sisters ran from the court, appalled with fright; the prince, who had hitherto maintained a profound silence, hastened to the support of Hepsai, who seemed about to fall from over excitement.

The pilgrim folded his arms and remained mute.

In a little while, Candase spoke, addressing the pilgrim.

"Sir," he said, "I perceive that you are shielded, indeed; doubtless, it is the essential poison of the serpent which is marked upon your garment. It is forbidden by the law for any man to use it, but since my heart is in perfect sympathy with your insistence, I choose to be silent.

"You have said that your purpose is to meet with the vestal and the priest face to face, and to hear from their lips the message they would send to Carmyhl.

"Good!—I will aid you to the utmost of my power, for I, also, must see them. I have a boat at the river's edge, and I beg that you will be my guest to the City, for a night. In the morning, we shall return with force, and break the chain of mystery which is strangling the peace of a noble house."

"Sir," answered the pilgrim, "I thank you most sincerely. But 'tis better that I should remain in secret over night,—better for our safety, and better for our purpose. I know of a hut in the adjacent glen, where I can pass the night; my food is there;—food for my body, and food for a distracted mind."

"You are, indeed, a zealous friend; Carmyhl is fortunate."

"He requires all, or nothing; I give him all."

"Phral, I honor you!—When shall we meet?"

"In the hour after sunrise."

"And where?"

"Before the altar of Isyl, in the garden meadow."

"Good! We will invoke his powers. And after that,—"

"To the temple!" said the pilgrim.

CHAPTER XIII

On the morning of the next day, there was a splendid pageant advancing up the river.

A flotilla consisting of twenty boats, led by one which was distinguished from the rest by its elegance of shape and the sumptuousness of its furnishing, came flashing over the dancing waters, impelled by oarsmen whose movements had the rythmic precision of a piece of music. The boats were filled with armed men, and their vesture glowed with color, and their arms glanced brilliantly.

The first boat approached the platform at the foot of the garden meadow before the House of Hepsai, but the others continued on, and passed out of sight around a bend of the river. The young prince, Candase, in the brilliant mail of a cataphract, over which a light tunic of brown silk was worn, stepped to the platform, spoke a few words to his captain, and immediately passed through the trellis gate to the meadow. He paused there, and looked up the river. In the course of a few minutes, he caught a glimpse of the flotilla; and, satisfied that its disposition was being made in accordance with his plans, he ascended slowly to the porch of the house.

A change had already occurred there. The purple draperies, emblems of mourning, had been taken down, and the image of the god Isyl was uncovered; a thick smoke ascended from the altar; a branch of thya was laid there, and a gilded bowl filled with freshly gathered lotuses stood at the feet of the idol. Before the altar, Shalzamene, robed in white, essayed the function of the god's

more particular vestal; she was there by preconcertion, and her simple actions betrayed timidity.

At a little distance, reserved and mysterious, stood the pilgrim of that strange sect of the Imaus, whose secret ways and unknown belief had made them objects of a grave suspicion, not to say of uneasiness, to the temples clustering in the mountains. His gold colored robe clung to his body with an appearance of statue-like rigidity; and the black hieroglyphics upon the upper part of it were sufficiently weird-looking to insure to the wearer immunity from a too close attention.

The prince observed also, that he was armed; armed, despite his assurance of the previous day that he never carried arms;—it was with a straight sword, broad, long, and of great weight; it depended from his girdle, by a chain.

"Sir," said Candase, "I greet you with morning's hope. How was the night, with you?"

"Noble prince," answered Phral, "I wish you all felicity;—the night was fair, but irksome."

"You are armed, I perceive. Do you anticipate opposition?"

"It is a borrowed sword,—borrowed for the exigencies of our enterprise; prudence demands that we be prepared for the uttermost. I do, indeed, anticipate opposition."

"We will overcome it; I, too, am armed;" and he opened his tunic, showing a formidable blade in a jeweled scabbard against the sinuous glintings of his mail.

"The time is ripe," said the pilgrim, advancing before the altar; "let us begin."

"My gracious sister," said the prince, addressing Shalzamene, "I pray you, make the invocation."

Shalzamene placed a bulb in the fire-dish, and there

went up from it an additional smoke, odorous of arbor-vitae.

She drew back, looking up to the face of Isyl.

"Thou loving god of our father's house," she said, hesitatingly, as if fearful of trespassing on another's sacred right,—"Isyl, hear us! Son of Alpleh of the mountains,—Isyl,—hear us. Arbiter of all our days,—Isyl,—hear us: We love thee, we hope in thee, we await thy pleasure. Speak to thy father-god, most gracious Isyl, on our behalf. Adjure him to grant our request. Beseech him to have mercy on our aching hearts, and to assuage the grief which fills us because of the silence of our beloved. Oh, Isyl, propitiate great Alpleh! Be urgent with him; be instant; be not denied.—Isyl, hear us! Son of Alpleh of the mountains,—Isyl,—hear us!"

The prayer ended, Shalzamene bowed her head and passed from before the altar to the porch. She looked back from thence at the prince and the pilgrim, held up her hand in token of farewell, and withdrew from their sight.

"The god is mute," said the prince; "is he thinking, perhaps?"

Phral drew nearer.

"He looks to be immutable," he said, regarding the features of the idol with apparent interest; "shall we ask a sign of him?"

"By all means, let us have a sign; it is but reasonable."

"Your excellency doubts the efficiency of this domestic god, I perceive. And yet,—who knows?—we cannot truly say that the thrice blessed and sacred form which typifies the hope and belief of so many is altogether without power. The sacred image has maintained his reputation for benignity through long and tranquil years, and I am

assured that no grievous harm has befallen under his aegis. A watchful god, and a kindly one."

"But like all the rest, excepting only great Belus," said the prince, "he is a usurper; and Alpleh himself, is a false god. Sir, I have heard things, and seen them, too, in the courts of the City, which would turn your soul in loathing from these vile pretenders. Their oracles are lies, and their powers are fictitious;—I have consulted the first, often; and as for the others, the occult, and supernatural, I have never seen a veritable demonstration of them, nor have I felt at any time, or in any degree, the influence which they profess to exert. 'Tis pitiful, that the House of Hepsai should be so darkly glamoured."

"Look!" exclaimed the pilgrim, suddenly; "the god is animate! He will speak to us!"

Candase started. At the first glance, it seemed, indeed, that a potent spirit was about to manifest itself; the gilded horns of the idol glowed with a roseate light; Isyl was responsive to the appeal which had been made!

But in a moment, the illusion passed;—it was a sunbeam of the early morning, the first to dart from the opposing cliffs of the mountain; it rested like a blush upon the shining metal, and anon was gone.

From the porch, Phyloprase and Shalzamene, together, came out to see why their visitors lingered. Hepsai and Thryahl came also, attended by their retinue of slaves; the group about the altar was greatly augmented.

"I pray you, sirs," said Phyloprase, "what is amiss?"

"We await a sign," answered the prince; "either a sign manifest to our eyes, or in our hearts,—one, or the other; —we must have a sign."

"My gracious prince," said Hepsai, "I implore you to be reasonable. The holy one works in secret, and vouch-

safes no sign. Only believe that he regards us kindly, and will give us the blessing which we ask, and all is well."

"Permit me, noble excellency!" interposed the pilgrim, with fervor; "your son Carmyhl assured me that his sister, the vestal,—Isyl's chosen and particular ministrant, —invoked this god, and besought him on the eve of that terrible vigil, to watch over her brother and to lead him safely back to the haven of his happiness. Instead of which, the pampered and incapable deity drowsed inert upon his altar while your son was in peril, and put forth no subtlety of unseen power to achieve his rescue. Furthermore, to the prayers, to the tears, and to the entreaties, of all your house, no jot of comfort has been imparted from his dark resources, and no inkling of the truth regarding Carmyhl's fate has been given. But now, he shall answer;—to me, as to Carmyhl's self."

"The god is immutable;—beware!"

"Oh, sir," cried Phyloprase, "be not so masterful, I beseech you! 'Tis unbecoming in my gentle brother's messenger."

"But if I prove the immutability of Isyl to be fictitious, I render you a service, and destroy the evil glamour which shadows all your house. I pray you, fear nothing. Carmyhl's love for you is so great that he would not let a figment of deceit harass and cheat you."

"Great Alpleh will destroy us!" said Thryahl, clinging to the arm of Hepsai; "Oh, that my son had never left us!"

The sisters stood apart, speechless with apprehension; the slaves stood mute, and cowering, and intermittently threw terrified glances toward the pilgrim;—to their eyes, the weird hieroglyphics on the upper portion of his garment possessed a horrible fascination. Hepsai seemed dumb.

Candase made a sign to the pilgrim, and drew back a little.

Phral unfastened the great sword from his girdle, and grasping it firmly, confronted the idol. It was undeniable that a certain amount of trepidation was in the breast of every one there assembled, for the purposed act was one upon which there hinged a thousand possibilities; whether of good, or of evil, neither Phral or Candase felt assured, but both were in a state of thrilling suspense and doubt.

"Isyl!" cried the pilgrim, looking upon the idol with fixed determination; "if thou art of the gods a vital or a sentient principle,—if thou hast but a spark, even, of the divine quality enshrined within thy form,—answer me! Son of Alpleh of the mountains, vindicate thy right to our allegiance;—answer me!"

"The god is petrified," said the prince; "there is no god but Belus."

"Isyl!" repeated the pilgrim; "A sign!"

The image sat unmoved; Isyl was frozen to his altar.

Phral lifted his sword and smote him in the neck, twice, —thrice,—and the thin copper yielded to the trenchant steel; the head was severed, and rolled to the ground.

Shalzamene shrieked, and fell upon her face. Phyloprase was transfixed with terror. Hepsai and Thryahl shrank back within the porch, falling upon their knees; and the slaves threw themselves on the ground in an ecstasy of fear.

So Isyl fell.

But no convulsion of the elements followed; the sky remained tranquil, and the dew-bright foliage sparkled in the morning sunlight;—a group of golden pheasants, perched on the eaves of the house, looked idly down, unruffled.

Candase sighed. The incident was full of vague sug-

gestions; on the consummation of this act, there would follow things of greater moment, and the results of it could not be measured with any certainty.

The pilgrim seemed overcome with emotion, but the character of it could not be surmised; he stood silent, leaning on his sword, with his head bent.

Several minutes elapsed, during which neither the prince or the pilgrim stirred;—perhaps they were still waiting for some demonstration of an occult power.

Suddenly, Candase threw off the heavy thrall.

"Come!" he said; "we have yet a greater task to perform, and the day is growing fast. Come! Before the meridian, the vestal must be free; Mithreb must be free; and the insolence of the temple shall be punished. Come!"

Phral lifted his head, and without a word followed the prince down the garden meadow to the trellis gate, and to the platform. The prince unfolded one of three differently colored silken handkerchiefs which he took from the inner breast of his tunic, and waved it to and fro a moment; then they waited.

From the sheltering canopy of a great tree on the bank of the river a little way up its course, the gilded shallop emerged like a living thing and came flashing swiftly through the dancing waters to their feet. Candase and the pilgrim stepped aboard and seated themselves under the canopy. It then became evident that the course of action had been previously considered and decided upon, for without a word being uttered, the boat was pointed to the middle of the river, the oars dipped in unison, and a swift flight taken for the goal. Arriving there in a few minutes, the captain of the rowers put a silver reed to his lips and blew a long and tremulous note, which, without being very loud, was exceedingly distinct and penetrating.

The answer came in the shape of one of the armed boats which had followed the shallop in the ascent of the river; it darted out from beyond the bend, and was rowed down swiftly; when it came to a pause, within an oar's length of the shallop, the splendid figure of Shoza in his glittering mail appeared in the midst, and to him the prince immediately addressed himself.

"Shoza," he said, "until the completion of our enterprise, it is necessary that I should resume the privilege—laid aside in your loved comradeship,—of exercising absolute authority over all. I beg you, therefore, take it not amiss to receive crisp orders from a stripling."

"My lord and prince," answered the cataphract, " 'tis your prerogative; use it; the powers we have with us shall obey unhesitatingly."

"Good!" returned Candase, smiling; "and now,—receive! In the first place, hide your harness with a cloak, lest the priests take alarm and multiply the obstacles to our success. Place fifty men in the grove behind the temple, within call of the bird you know of;"—and he showed him a small crystal object which depended from a golden chain round his neck;—"let the others draw up by the wooded rock near the terrace, and land there, a dozen of them coming by different courses to the great porch and entering the temple quietly, under civilian robes. Be quick,—and silent."

Shoza made a sign of acquiescence, and immediately returned up the river to where the rest of the flotilla lay concealed. The shallop of the prince was then rowed leisurely toward the shore, and down to the marble steps of the great terrace which fronted the temple of Alpleh.

The situation of the temple was very beautiful, being upon a low eminence surrounded by groups of magnificent trees, and adorned with parterres of the most sump-

tuous and fragrant flowers. The steps of the platform in front of it dipped into the bright clear water, which, at that place, was artistically islanded with lotuses and lilies, the flowers of which were glowing with almost every color. The great pillars of white marble gleamed proudly above, to the pediment which contrasted richly against the soft blue sky, and the whole front was reflected perfectly in the limpid depths below.

The worship of the gods was surrounded by every charm which could excite the pleasure of the eyes, for that primal pleasure was the beginning of the entanglement of the other senses;—the eyes were pleased, and the heart then asked questions.

Devotees and idlers were there, in great numbers. From the edge of the water upward, the steps were picturesquely cumbered by men, women, and children,, and numbers of them were grouped upon the terrace, or were walking amidst the parterres of blossoming plants. Their garments were fashioned after every conceivable pattern, amongst which the straight flowing robe seemed to predominate, and the colors displayed were endless in variety. Although the greater number were clad in cotton fabrics, there were several of the more fortunate class who were wrapped in silk, and in many instances even in a species of semi-transparent gold and silver tissue, these latter being women and girls from adjacent palaces, whose daring in their mode of dress excited no other comment than the universal one of admiration.

Very little confusion was discernible in this kaleidoscopic assembly, and the voices of those in conversation were subdued to an indistinct murmur; the fluttering of gauzey veils, and the perpetually changing glances of color in the graceful costumes, made a picture of wonderful attractiveness. By the time the delicious coolness of the

morning should give way to the sun's more fervid heat, these happy loiterers would depart, and be scattered to their homes like poppies and primroses and white jasmin, to assemble again in the sunset hour and resume the ever pleasant, though profitless, amusement.

Candase and the pilgrim ascended the steps to the platform, having first dismissed their boat to an idle loitering not too far away. They had scarcely reached the broad terrace, when Phral stopped abruptly, with his eyes fixed upon a quickly moving figure making its way through the crowd.

It was that of a man, who, wearing the gray tunic of a shepherd, was hastening with all speed in their direction. Whether from over haste, and a particular susceptibility to the heat of the day, or from some other cause, he appeared to be so inconvenienced with perspiration that he used the wide sleeves of his garment assiduously in assuaging it; and was so thoroughly absorbed in that occupation that it was impossible to catch a glimpse of his face. His action had a suspicious look, but he soon gained the porch of the temple and entered it.

The pilgrim muttered a word, or a name, which the prince did not comprehend.

When they reached the porch and entered the temple, they were met by a number of priests in white robes, who made them a profound obeisance. These priests were of the altars, and were never seen in the outward circle except on extraordinary occasions; it was therefore plain enough that the quality of one, at least, of the temple's visitants, was known.

Candase, however, was indifferent, for he had made no attempt at disguising himself; on the contrary, he believed that, his personality being known, it would facilitate and hasten the errand which brought him there, to the extent,

at any rate, of its first stage, which was to be an appeal to the oracle.

The gloom which brooded in the temple seemed more profound from its contrast to the brilliant sunlight without; nevertheless, a large number of worshippers were dimly visible, either standing as if fixed to the ground, or prostrate on their faces. The air was thick with incense; the mighty pillars loomed here and there with ghastly effect; pale cressets flamed lambently; and beyond, and above,—its presence felt, rather than seen,—was the imperturbable and mysterious image of the great god Alpleh.

In the throng by one of the altars, Candase perceived two or three other figures in gold-colored robes like the one worn by his companion, with the exception that no baleful hieroglyphics were discernible upon them; the discovery convinced him that Phral had come to the vale with some of his fellows, and that he had made preparations for a feared contingency. The prince whispered his conjecture softly, and the pilgrim bowed his head in confirmation.

At another altar, where a green flame glared intermittently, they both perceived the man who had pushed his way so hurriedly through the throng outside,—the shepherd in the gray tunic; he was conversing earnestly with two of the priests of the outer circle, and appeared to be much exercised over the subject in discussion.

A low rumble like distant thunder, suddenly engaged the attention of all.

Those who stood inert, were galvanised into a sprightly exercise of their limbs, and those lying prone on the marble pavement bounded up and turned their faces toward the great altar;—a silvery note was sounded.

Then the filmous pale light was flashed up from below,

as on the occasion of Shoza's visit; and stood, as it were, like a vast thin sheet of crystal, reaching from one side of the temple to the other, and from the ground to the upper darkness, where it was lost. Through it, glimpses of golden vases, and statues, with here and there a flash of jewels marking the outlines of strange and incomprehensible shapes were had, as one might see some wondrous treasure through a broad cascade of moonlit water. Overlooking all, the impressive figure of the god was faintly perceptible, its four wings curving upwards ominously, and its face wrapped in a pallor which was both forbidding and disquieting; the light from below englamoured it.

Candase and Phral stood expectant, waiting for the ceremony which preceded invocation.

Like a vision, it came. Though often repeated, it was always new, always beautiful, and always mystifying.

Two by two, the vestals emerged from the darkness into the light, robed in white, their arms folded upon their bosoms, their faces lifted up to the idol. They glided slowly, like immaterial beings, past the great pedestal, and finally were hidden in the darkness of the other side; the light subsided, as if drawn down like a flimsy curtain, and in a minute was utterly gone; uncertainty, and vague shadows, remained.

Candase spoke softly to one of the priests, who proceeded at once to place one of the sacred bulbs in the flaming dish of the principal altar. A thick smoke arose from it and spread like a pall through the temple; the strong odor of arborvitae succeeded.

The prince and the pilgrim stood side by side at the feet of Alpleh, and the prince made the appeal in a clear voice which stirred the sombre atmosphere like the notes of a flute.

"Great Alpleh," he said, "most exalted and puissant of the gods of the mountains, arbiter of fate, and dispenser of mercies we invoke thy loving consideration of our case. We beseech thee, enlighten us as to the state and welfare of thy most sacred vestal, Dahlymel, whom we fain would speak with for the comfort of her friends and kin. Grant us but a minute with her, face to face, and we will bless thee, and render fruits meet for thy glory.

"We beseech thee also to bring us to speech with thy holy servant Mithreb, that we may assure ourselves of his felicity in other than that which is inherent and inevitable in thy service.—Alpleh, god of the mountains, hear us, and grant our prayer."

A deadly silence followed this appeal, and it was the more oppressive because of the presence of so many dumb and shadowy listeners. The devotees, and the priests of the outer circle moving noiselessly amongst them, were equally astonished and dismayed by the boldness of the request, and suspended for the moment their own more personal interests.

Several minutes elapsed, during which no intimation of the slightest kind was given to show that the appeal had been heard, or, if heard, would be responded to; the prince fixed his eyes on the face of the idol and waited, with growing impatience.

A reasonable time having elapsed, he spoke again.

"Great Alpleh," he said, "vouchsafe an answer to thy servants. Encourage us;—lift the weight from our hearts."

Again, a long silence ensued.

Then suddenly, from the cloud which hovered above them, a rolling, hollow sound came down to the awed listeners; it was followed by a weird note, as of chafing cym-

bals;—and a voice, preternatural in its tones, issuing from the mouth of the idol, gave a tardy answer:

"When the wolf is chained, the lamb may go free. When the fox slumbers, the hares escape. When the sun goes backward, the mountain follows. Whoso is ready, he shall receive that which he craved unready."

The prince drew back, grasping the sleeve of Phral; he was discomfited.

They waited again in silence for the space of several minutes, but as the oracle remained dumb, Phral lifted up his voice and cried—

"Great Alpleh, mercy! Thou god who rulest the elements, and hath knowledge of our distress, be merciful! Alpleh, speak!—and render to thy servants what they humbly ask and pray of thee. By the white crown of Sariphi, and by the sunlight on the mountains,—Alpleh,—Alpleh,—answer us!"

The oracle was mute.

There was a stir in the obscurity, amongst the wondering worshippers; and from their frightened midst came several men in diverse apparel, who jostled each other before the altar, and shouted in accord:

"God of the mountains, rumble! Give from thy cliffs a sound of power! Alpleh!—from thy hills of snow, a whisper; from the crevices of thy rocks, an echo!"

After a pause, they shouted again, and there was a tone of derision in their voices:

"There is no god but Belus!"

The priests of the outer circle came thronging towards them in a body; the ministrant of the cressets stirred the fires until there was a ruddy glow throughout the temple. By the light of the dancing and high streaming flames, a scene of wild confusion was revealed, as men, women, and children, ran screaming to the portal.

The men who had so unexpectedly joined in the invocation to the dreaded god, threw off their cloaks, and proved to be soldiers of the prince, in brown and white body sheathing, protected by breastplates of brass, and armed with glittering swords; they were there in accordance with the prince's scheme, as carried out by Shoza.

"How many are here?" asked Candase.

"Twenty, gracious lord," one answered.

"A dozen guard the porch, at once. Let the people go their way, but let no priest escape. Are the others assembled?"

"As you commanded, gracious lord."

"That is well. See to it that the cressets give more light; there is a log of an image yonder, will burn with sufficiency. The hour is pregnant,—be watchful!"

The soldiers lifted their arms defiantly to the grim deity and repeated their shout:

"There is no god but Belus!"

The men assigned to the porch took up their positions on either side of it with alacrity, while the people in their frantic efforts to escape from the unspeakable horror of the desecration ran before them, many stumbling, many falling, but all continuing to scramble forward and to rend the air with shrieks and doleful cries.

Phral seemed preternaturally calm.

"I will have no hand in bloodshed," he said to Candase, "but will follow where you lead."

"Come, then!" answered the prince, and with the eight soldiers left to him, leaped upon the barrier and made his way along the top of it to that side of the temple whence the vestals had emerged in their procession.

Phral followed along the upper step of the flight ending at the base of the barrier.

Reaching the wall, Candase was confronted with a brazen door; it was closed, and could not be opened.

In the midst of the dilemma, there was a shout and a rush from the porch, and Shoza came bounding towards them. The cataphract was in full armor, and carried his battle axe.

CHAPTER XIV

WITH the coming of Shoza, an additional flame was added to the fire of passionate endeavor.

"To the gate of the barrier!" he cried; "here! before they have time to draw the bars across;" and he plunged at once into the involvement of shadow and passage, and disappeared.

Candase sprang down on the inner side of the barrier, and running along towards the other extremity, was on the point of gaining it, when a bar of steel descended like a flash from amidst the confusing objects looming at one side, and struck him to the ground; a dozen stalwart priests in white robes, their faces inflamed, and their eyes bulging with fear, had rushed forth to repel the intruders. They were armed with tripods, and trivets, formidable brass rods, and other oddly assorted but efficient articles used in the mysteries of their office; they wielded them with surprising skill,—but doubtless there were many of the White Vultures amongst them.

The soldiers fell upon them furiously, and bore them back into the darkness; they were more skilful than their opponents, and their swords were sharp and heavy. In a brief space, half the priests were slain, and their bodies cumbered the slippery stones. The others fled by some secret passage, and pursuit of them was impossible.

Before they had all withdrawn, Candase was lifted up by Shoza, and the discovery was made that the iron bar had missed the purpose of the hand that wielded it; instead of killing outright, or even of wounding, it had caught in the folds of the tunic and brought the prince

down with prodigious force; no injury had been inflicted upon him other than that which was consequent on the shock of so unexpected an assault.

A great shout of gladness went up from his followers, and the sound of it was so inspiriting that Candase quickly recovered himself and stood again upon his feet.

"The god is well served," he said lightly, "and we must be merciless. Shoza, lead us to the gate you mentioned; the temple of Alpleh is doubtless familiar to you, but to me, it is a labyrinth."

Accordingly, Shoza led them to the barrier gate, where the grim sentinel over that forbidden place was stationed with a great mace studded with points of steel. Close behind him, a crowd of resolute priests stood quivering with expectation.

Shoza led, swinging his battle axe with an impetuosity which was terrifying.

At the first great sweep of the curved blade, breast high, three of the opponents fell to the ground, and the soldiers coming opportunely, a dash was made for the passage, and the barrier was crossed with a shout.

One of the soldiers received a mortal wound from a brazen trivet, another was crushed by the sentinel's terrible mace, and both of them tumbled backward down the steps, their blood streaming.

The success of the assault was the signal for a horrid and deafening uproar;—the gongs began to bray.

The great gongs which were used in the more elaborate and impressive ceremonies accompanying the rites of mourning were being beat upon in some remote part of the inner temple, and the discordant sounds rolled out above and below in a continuous and maddening iteration.

At the same time, a flame of brilliant light dispersed the tantalising shadows, and a cry of exultation arose in

the outer temple; the soldiers were burning the wooden images.

Passing the barrier, Shoza and his companions used their weapons so effectually that they were soon in the edge of the first great chamber of secrets, but before an entrance could be made, the little band was seriously depleted.

Of the eight soldiers whose valor had helped so materially in the shifting fray, but two were left; the others lay dead and mangled on the steps, and by the narrow gate.

Fortunately for the success of the enterprise so far, the gray priests of the outer circle were either paralysed by fear, or were appalled at the idea of passing through the forbidden gate of the barrier; up to this moment, not one of them had offered the least opposition, and it was evident from their wild gesticulations that they expected some tremendous exercise of the unseen power of the god.

Candase now led, and attacked the solid phalanx opposed to him. It was a formidable one, armed with long poles, utensils of brass, axes, and even two-bladed daggers of a kind so unusual and dangerous that consummate skill was necessary in their avoidance.

Shoza and Phral and the two soldiers pressed on, and the undisciplined horde before them yielded slowly.

The crashing of arms on opposing shields was at its height when a powerful voice shouted from the barrier:

"Beware, all! It is the son of Ahlmarath, our lord and king!"

A priest of the outer circle had whispered the identity of the prince, and it was a priest at the gate who shouted it.

Those in the white robes paid no heed, but fought the harder; they had known beforehand of the presence of

THE ASSAULT ON THE TEMPLE.—*Chapter* 14.

the king's son, and knowing also the terrible consequences involved, were rendered reckless and almost frantic.

Suddenly, a diversion occurred.

The secret door in the wall which backed the image of Alpleh was thrown wide open, and a giant figure robed in black sprang out and plunged within their midst.

It was the self-same priest whom Shoza had wounded, months since; the chief priest of the temple; the malevolent and lying priest who spoke the cloudy oracles from the lips of Alpleh.

He was armed with a mighty scimeter, and his lips were parted in a grin of angry passion; he passed with an irresistible force between the amazed combatants without so much as looking at them, and to the astonishment of the latter almost ran in the eagerness of his wrath toward the farther side of the chamber.

There, standing aloof by a pillar, was the solitary figure of a priest in the gray vestment of the outer circle; he seemed indifferent to the things transpiring, and was unarmed.

Reaching him, the monster cut him down with bloody cruelty.

"The fox is slain!" he cried; "the hares are safe!"—then turning quickly,—"The wolf!" he continued with flaming eyes;—"a handful of rubies, and the choicest vestal of the light, to him who takes the body of the wolf alive!"

Shoza confronted him.

"Devil!" he exclaimed; "was it for this, I showed you mercy on a day long past?" and aimed a furious blow at his head.

Another priest, unwarily blundering, intercepted the fatal stroke, and tumbled headlong; another, throwing

himself before the monster to protect him, was spitted on the sword of Candase.

Meanwhile, the pilgrim was suddenly inflamed with emotion; hitherto he had but parried blows, and kept himself in a cool reserve, protectingly, at the side of Candase. He now ran hastily to the body of the gray priest and threw himself upon it, staring intently at the dead face, cleft and bloody.

He rose up staggeringly, and sought the figure of the murderer with his eyes, gasping the while—" 'Tis Carmyhl's brother! 'Tis Mithreb,—whom we came to save."

"The gods shall answer!" called Shoza, recovering his axe from its entanglement; the ground was cumbered with the bodies of slaughtered priests, and their white robes were crimsoning fast.

The black priest, with a mad imprecation on his lips, and his eyes red with fury, raised the scimeter in both hands, and with a stride was before the cataphract.

Shoza slipped upon the treacherous stone and fell to his knee; the prince leaped forward and seized him by the shoulder—

There was a rush, and the pilgrim and the priest were breast to breast.

The scimeter dropped harmless from the monster's hand and the evil genius of the temple sank with a gasp, transfixed with the sword which had severed the head of Isyl.

And yet this summary vengeance seemed not enough to Phral; who drew his blade from its hideous sheath and plunged like a tiger to the aid of the soldiers fighting with unremitting zeal close by.

The priests used their novel weapons with great dexterity and made an ever-changing barrier between themselves and the dreaded axe of Shoza.

Candase began to falter, somewhat, but the pilgrim seemed endued with a new and resistless energy; his sword glanced meteor-like in every direction, and a shriek marked its downward, and a heavy fall its upward, course; the overstrained soldiers were barely able to ward off the dangerous thrusts of the poles and the confusing assaults of the daggers.

Then came from the broken barrier an accession to the prince's forces in the shape of six vigorous figures in the gold hued robes of the Imaus. They were unarmed, but fearless; and used the arts of the athlete to so great an advantage that in a twinkling each had disarmed an adversary and slain him with his own missile.

While the battle raged, the gongs were roaring in the distance, and a great yet baleful light, accompanied with ominous sounds of crackling, proved that the temple itself was ablaze.

At this critical moment, a single figure ran through the barrier gate, and traversing the scene of strife without pausing, entered the narrow opening at the farthest side, and disappeared.

It was the shepherd.

Candase perceived him and called to his companions to follow; and the priests being now overcome, they all gave pursuit, Phral leading. They reached the door, passed through it easily into a smaller chamber, and through that, under a magnificent arch, to a grand amphitheatre.

It was more of an oval court, than an amphitheatre; open to the sky, long, bright, and balconied in tiers all around; a court paved with white marble, and shining with reflections.

The shepherd had disappeared.

At first, the Imaus were lost in wonder, and hesitated,

not quite understanding it; but the others looked rapidly around them for signs of lurking foes.

It was a place of carousal, evidently; and the overturned tables and disordered couches lying about in splendid confusion near a great fountain which spouted in the midst, were evidences of the haste and alarm with which the sybaritic revelers had abandoned the pleasures of their feasting.

On all sides, shining marble pillars arose, tier above tier, each row of columns standing back from those below them for a space sufficient to allow of galleries, which extended uninterruptedly around the whole ellipse; numberless alcoves in the walls were visible, some of them draped with sumptuous fabrics of silk and cloth of gold, and others open, permitting the soft breeze from adjacent gardens to enter freely.

Candase ran to one of these latter, and putting the crystal call to his lips blew a thrilling note like a wild bird's scream, upon it; an answering shout, as from many voices at a distance, proved that it had been heard.

At the same time, a door at the farther end of the first gallery above was thrown violently open, and a number of women in gorgeous but disarrayed apparel, came hurriedly out and ran shrieking along the corridor.

They were followed by others, amongst whom could be distinguished the slender and spirit-like forms of vestals, who rent their veils with fear, as they came weeping and crying out piteously. Slaves in crimson vestments followed them wildly, with uplifted hands and moaning voices.

At the lower end of the gallery, toward which all were thronging, there was an arched way similar to that by which the invaders had made their entrance, and, indeed, opposite to it; it appeared to be the only outlet, but whither

it led, was a matter of conjecture; though glimpses of shining dark leaves at one side, seemed to prove that it was an exit to the gardens of the temple.

The blue sky overhead was obscured by heavy clouds of pungent smoke, which rolled over the upper cornice of the amphitheatre, curling downward, and spreading abroad like a dreadful pall.

The fugitives in the gallery were nearing the end of it, impeding each other by the vehemence of their flight; the Imaus ran hither and thither searching the alcoves; the soldiers guarded the arch of entrance; when—

"Look!" cried the pilgrim suddenly, starting forward and clutching the sleeve of Candase.

There was a wild commotion in the doorway whence the slaves had just emerged; the voices of men raised in anger were heard, mingled with the shrieks of women.

A tall figure dashed violently out from it, bearing a burden.

The figure was that of the shepherd; his burden was the vestal, Dahlymel.

Candase dropped his sword, and running towards a balcony hanging just below the first cornice, tried to reach it. He looked for some projection which would afford a hold for his hands and feet; he grasped the folds of heavy drapery;—but the projections were insufficient, and the drapery was rent in his hands, refusing to sustain him; he called out fiercely to the ravisher.

The shepherd paid no heed, but hastened swiftly down the corridor towards the exit to the garden; he clasped the vestal firmly to his breast, as though it were a priceless treasure; the vestal cried out repeatedly in thrilling tones—

"Hyla! Hyla!—Oh, Hyla!"

From the doorway, came following a struggling mass of women and men in a state of prodigious excitement.

Shoza and his comrades ran along towards the lower end of the amphitheatre, with their eyes fixed on the shepherd; they were furious, and almost dismayed at their helpless plight;—but fortune was gracious:

At the passing of one of the alcoves, Candase discovered a flight of marble steps leading up to the middle of the gallery, and with a shout, they ascended them together.

Before they reached the top, a boding voice called hoarsely:

"The devil is broken loose! Beware!"

There was a rattle and clash, as of a thrashing iron chain, and the next moment the leopard was seen bounding along the cornice which topped the columns of the first gallery; a thick chain was attached to his neck, but it was broken, and the end of it whipped the cornice repeatedly as he flew along. His eyes were blazing, and his jaws were wide apart, frothing, and showing his formidable teeth in a horrid and portentious grin.

The shepherd reached the staircase; Dahlymel cried out faintly and despairingly—

"Hyla! Hyla!"

The magnificent beast was there at last, on the cornice, above her head; he gave a sibilant cry, crouched low, and then like a thunderbolt sprang upon the shepherd, landing on his shoulder and bearing him to the ground.

In an instant his fangs were buried in the neck of the ravisher; he was insatiate;—and tore the shepherd's head from his body.

The men and women following after, shrank back appalled.

Shoza and his comrades reached the gallery and ran

swiftly forward, not in the least comprehending what had befallen, for the staircase had led them far astray. In a moment, however, they understood the tragedy; the leopard was standing by the lifeless figure of the vestal, lashing his tail and panting fiercely.

Candase threw himself upon his knees by the side of Dahlymel, and lifting her, looked with a passionate fear on her face; it was cold, and white as her robes.

The pilgrim knelt also and took her hands in his, holding them tenderly while Shoza gently chafed her forehead. The soldiers brought one of the frightened women to minister to the vestal, and the Imaus drove the others back, keeping a space clear.

"She lives!" cried the prince, suddenly.

"She lives, indeed," added the pilgrim; "and is unharmed. Who will take her hence?—for the temple is fallen, and dangers are rife on every side."

"Give me the charge," said Candase; "I will conduct her, and safely shrine my treasure, whom we have so haply saved."

Dahlymel sighed, and opened her eyes.

"Hyla!" she whispered.

The leopard crouched upon the ground and laid his head against her arm; she sat up, and kissed her preserver between the eyes.

In a little while she was fully recovered, and stood up, leaning with a charming confidence against the prince, who regarded her with tender but mute solicitude.

By this time the sky was become more darkly obscured than ever, and the smoke of the burning temple made breathing a difficult matter. The roar of the gongs was continuous, and with it were mingled the cries of a frantic multitude engaged in bloody strife, either in defense of the temple, or for vengeance upon the destroyers of it.

Dahlymel, supported between Candase and Shoza, began to descend the staircase leading to the gardens, when they were startled by hearing a short cry from the pilgrim. Turning, they perceived that he was looking on the body of the slain shepherd. In a moment, he said:

"My mission from Carmyhl ends here; it is completed. From now, my path is different from yours, and of necessity leads far hence. Pardon my abruptness. To Carmyhl, I shall say that his priestly brother is dead; that his dearly loved and favorite sister is well, and under the protection of efficient power; and that the prized friend of his early youth has perished in the instant of a hideous falsehood. Sept is dead."

"Sept?" cried Shoza, wonderingly.

"This is the body of Sept," replied the pilgrim; "I knew him well;—and the leopard has taken vengeance upon him."

A large body of soldiers now came pouring into the amphitheatre below, shouting to all within hearing that the temple was ablaze, and that escape from death was to be compassed only by an instant flight.

"The vestals are saved," they added, "and all the women but these in the gallery. Lord prince, guard yourself! Great Alpleh is fallen from his seat, and his servants are slain!"

Before the warning words were fully uttered, a thunderous sound proclaimed that the roof had fallen in.

A sheet of dark red flame sprang up and played with forked tongues in the sombre canopy of smoke; the sound of the gongs ceased, but the shrieks and cries of the swaying multitude without continued to rend the air.

"Come!" said Candase to his followers, as he descended the broad staircase with Dahlymel, over whom he had

thrown a protecting mantle; the leopard clung to the side of his lovely mistress, and arched his neck proudly.

The throng from the chamber whence Dahlymel had been forcibly brought by the daring Sept, pressed closely upon her rescuers, and for a while it was impossible for them to keep together.

At last, the garden was reached, and Shoza took his place at the prince's side.

"Where is Phral?" asked Candase, looking backward; "—where is the pilgrim?"

"Vanished;" answered Shoza; "—a pilgrim for the day only; Phral for the day only;—*I know him.*"

"Shoza, speak!—who is he! By the gods, little and big, I suspected an incognito;—who is he?"

"The man whom your father dreads; the man whose voice is like the lightning, riving the altars and driving the priests to frenzy."

"What! The *Preacher?*"

"Yes. 'Twas PALLAHMYHL."

CHAPTER XV

PROPHTHASIA was the city of the king, standing upon both sides of the River of Hesydrus, and extending along its banks for thirty leagues.

It was beyond comparison the most magnificent assemblage of palaces and temples in all the East, and its isolation from the rest of the world tended to concentrate within its borders all enlightenment, and to develop in a high degree the wonderful energies of the people.

It contained the courts of the powers which ruled all the land. The princes of Arabis and of Issedon, of Aria, and Carmania, lived sumptuously there, in full accord with the lords and mighty men of Palibothra; and ruled imperiously, their sway being limited only by the supreme and willful authority of the king himself, who was a king indeed.

This conjoint dominion extended over the vast and fertile countries whose borders were washed upon the south by the waters of the Erythrean Sea, and shadowed upon the north by the tremendous barrier of the Paropamissus; whose provinces and principalities lay scattered in the east beyond the turgid course of the Ganges as far as to the land of Magog; and to the west, where greater mountains frowned warningly on the empires of the Persians and the Scythians.

Prophthasia was so vast as to be almost a kingdom in itself; it was the ineffable jewel in the crown of Belus; and was the fountain of all power in the land of the idolaters.

The river divided it into two equal parts. It came like

a jeweled serpent winding down from the lesser hills of the mountain of Sariphi; and passed through the woody reaches of the lower slopes, through the rock-ledged glens below them, through the fields and meadows of the husbandmen, through the numberless gardens of the plain; and laved the skirts of clustering hamlets, and kissed the lily covered steps of temples and palaces, and glided finally in triumph through the length of the city;—and thence onward, crisp and broad, to other scenes, to desert wastes, to salty airs, and to the sea, wherefrom the ships came up.

The merchants of every known country were represented in the splendid marts; and trafficked there, alternately draining and replenishing the magazines and warehouses, within whose walls were garnered the wealth of kingdoms and the treasure which symbolised the fortunes of thousands of people.

Through the gates, and along the endless and busy streets marched the caravans from far and near; and the precious burdens and equipages whose trappings were dusty with the journeys they had made through wilderness and desert, and the rocky and barren reaches upon the skirts of the kingdom.

Strange ships from every clime rode on the bosom of the river; and the gilded argosies which ventured only to the islands of the sea were there in restless numbers, the masts glinting, and gay banners fluttering, as the broad sails bent to favoring breezes, or as the oars were plied in glittering frequency over the sunlit water.

Ahlmarath, the king, was powerful to the verge of omnipotence; and shared with the great god Belus the honor and glory of the highest estate to which men had as yet attained.

He looked toward the west, and the Persians trembled; to the east, and the princes of Palibothra prostrated them-

selves; to the north, and the Scythians hastened their ambassadors to his court; to the south, and the chambers of the Prasodis were opened wide.

Since his coming to the throne, his power and fame had waxed to a dangerous magnificence. Every wish of his heart had been gratified, and every dream of his ambition realised; in the pomp of self-glorifying ceremonies, and in the luxury of over-gratified desires, he had come to think himself a god, and to question the supremacy of Belus, the king of the gods.

It was at this time,—that is to say, in the year which witnessed the downfall of Alpleh,—that the king began to falter in his pleasures; began to wear an abstracted look; and consulted the gods and the oracles more frequently.

Before long, that condition of his mind developed into a consuming dread, and dread gave place to a fear which gnawed at his vitals mercilessly.

It was as though some subtle influence of a menace were in the very air; no signs were apparent to his eyes, which reason could decipher; and his understanding was unappealed to, by anything which had the remotest semblance of evil.

It was a mystery to him when the first vague premonition came to shadow the golden hours. Ahlmarath felt the creeping touch of an aching disquiet, but could assign no cause for it whatever; he only knew that he was oppressed by some haunting spirit which seemed to whisper of some unimaginable calamity.

In this terrifying suspense, many days passed;—and weeks; and months.

When suddenly, on a day of the vernal equinox, tidings were brought to him of a ferment which was rising and spreading in one of the adjacent principalities, instigated by the preaching of a fanatic of the sect of hooded Imaus;

—a sect which, though never accounted dangerous, had always been regarded in the city with apprehension, because of its opposition to all the tenets of the temple priesthood.

The theme of the preacher was said to be always the same:—he urged immediate and uncompromising rebellion, not against the throne, or the king, or the laws, but against the unlimited and crushing sway of the gods which rioted under Belus;—some said against Belus himself, the arbiter over all.

Now, the power and glory of the king were still dependent on the will of Belus.

Therefore the enemy of the god was the enemy of the king.

The reception of these tidings shook the soul of Ahlmarath, and pierced his heart with the icy talons of a foe revealed. For he knew on the instant, the cause of all the misery he had suffered; and knew, from the fierce acceleration of that misery, that an evil of more than passing gravity was imminent. The adherents to the doctrines of the Imaus were reputed to be numberless; and the very vagueness and mystery which enshrouded them, helped on conjecture until no man could say who was, or who was not, a secret member of the sect.

The king's malady having thus been made acute, and his hitherto visionary alarms being all at once invested with the warrant of a reasonable cause, he perceived the strong necessity of meeting the threatened horror with boldness and celerity.

To that end, a royal decree was issued, whose substance was to the effect that instant abandonment of their schemes was required of the hooded agitators; that immunity from punishment for their transgressions in the past would be granted to all, except to the principal offender,

the preacher Pallahmyhl; and finally, that the august day of the rendering of tribute,—called the Feast of Homage, —was the day upon which the submission of the malcontents must be made to the king by embassy, or through messengers appointed with power from the leaders.

After this, a season of suspense followed, but at last the fateful day arrived upon which was to be decided a question involving either a signal triumph of the king's authority, or the precipitation of an unutterable woe;—and it was a singular coincidence, that the Feast of Homage fell upon the very day of the assault on the temple of Alpleh by Candase and his followers.

The absence of the prince from the city on that preëminent occasion was severely animadverted upon by some of the courtiers fawning near the throne, but his brothers were rather pleased than otherwise;—Candase was the beloved favorite of the people.

The crucial time arrived, and the festival began.

It was a revel in which all sorts and conditions of the people abandoned themselves to mirth and music, to feasting, and to the unrestricted enjoyment of the gayest holiday of the year. They swarmed in every place of vantage, and their voices rose in continuous waves of sound upon every side, and along the whole extent of the brilliant waterway.

They were dressed in their festal robes, and wore sprays of frankincense blossoms on their breasts, symbolising loyalty; the women and girls were especially distinguished by the splendor of their attire, and almost all of them were chapleted with roses or girdled with almug and bay leaves, the latter adornment signifying obedience.

Elephants in gorgeous panoply moved majestically in grand procession here and there, and dromedaries garnitured with silk and fringe and waving plumes, bore their

laughing riders through the streets and lanes, sometimes singly, but oftener in companies of twenty, or more.

The horses pranced in magnificent array; thousands of them upon this day drew glittering chariots along the vast colonnades, and the charioteers made merry with the pedestrians, no one amongst them all being hampered by considerations of those formalities which, between strangers, were necessary curbs to undue familiarity on ordinary occasions, but were now by universal consent wholly suspended.

Pageant after pageant filled the avenues and public places with an endless glory of shifting scenes and colors; the delights of the eye were multitudinous, and of the other senses, almost overwhelming.

And yet, the most desired of all,—at least by Ahlmarath, who sat upon his throne in dazzling state, waiting, as it were,—the one thing necessary to the day's perfection, a message or embassy, from the leaders of the Imaus,—there was neither.

All day long, the king's emissaries made diligent search, but could find no signs of the Imaus. Amongst the people, gold colored robes were plentiful, as also were robes of veritable cloth of gold; and mystical figures glided hither and thither in the throngs; but the peculiar scrutiny to which they were all subjected only proved them to be innocent citizens, or gay and thoughtless masquers, not so innocent, but still, not guilty of heresy.

No message came from Pallahmyhl; the sun passed the meridian, and the day waned into night.

The full moon shone in the heavens, white and radiant; and in magical contrast to its silver floods of light, countless myriads of sparkling lamps and cressets added a brighter glow to the illumination of all things.

The ships and smaller vessels on the river seemed like

flocks of richly plumaged birds, poised midway between the sky above and the sky below. The river was like a mirror of crystal so pure as to be almost invisible; and reflected in its depths with wonderful exactness the moonlit sky, the flashing lamps and fires, the white quays partly shadowed under gay pavilions, the bannered ships, and the gilded pleasure craft, all mingled and wavering, unstable, and dream-like.

For when the night was fallen, the apotheosis of delights was achieved; the strongly marked and easily comprehended realities of the day took on the glamour of a less incisive light, and the city was like a vision of enchantment wherein all things were beautiful.

The public baths were beautiful;—the white walls of marble on which the moonlight glimmered, and the viney walks about them into which stole fugitive rays from perfumed cressets; the slender arcades lightly veiled with draperies, some of which were looped with gilded cords, and some hanging close; the fretted domes which hung like bells of hyacinth over plashing fountains; the interwoven arches, and the pillared galleries; and the glowing peristyles, echoing with music and the mirth of happy bathers.

No follower of Pallahmyhl was seen in any of these.

Beautiful were the bazaars;—the curtained alcoves wherein the pearl-toothed and raven-bearded jeweler displayed his dazzling wares of gold and silver and precious gems, and the magnificent fantasies which were a part of them, and enhanced their value; the booths of the merchants in silk and linen and lace and cloth of gold and silver; the palm-leaf canopies under which the purveyors of fruit and flowers tempted the eager throngs with honey and bloom and fragrance; the alluring displays of the red

robed perfumers; the bright spaces reserved to the dancers, and to the singing bands from the mountains.

Yet beautiful as they were, they proved but mockeries to the spies of Ahlmarath;—not even amidst the shifting scenes of the numberless bazaars could a member of the Imaus be found.

The temples of the gods were beautiful;—albeit screening rites and orgies not in accord with their outer aspect, yet wonderfully fair; the great walls rising sublimely above the broad roofs of the city, many of them draped to the very pinnacles with ivy and bauhinia, and all of them sumptuously darkened here and there by clustering groups of holy cedars, cypresses, and terebinths; the massive pillars uplifting sculptored pediments; the domes, like fallen moons; the dragon shapes and mystic forms of the carved images which loomed from the rose gardens and the water lilies below; the broad stairs, and the platforms of burnished brass; the half-opened portals whence the light from golden lamps was streaming; the incense clouds that hovered; and the long processions of white-robed priests ascending and descending, chanting the hymns of the awful deities within.

Not here,—surely not here, would any followers of the gods' great enemy venture; but the king's emissaries watched in all the accessible nooks, nevertheless,—and watched in vain.

And far from the crush, and the seething splendors of the places by the river's sides; far from the grand avenues, and the resounding courts,—beautiful indeed were the little houses veiled in flowers, where they nestled, each in its own humble garden; and the lanes with their pretty decorations, where the air was purer, and the joys more rational; the lesser streets through which the sounds of

music and laughing voices rippled;—and the bounding children, scarce knowing why they were so happy.

But neither the baths, nor the bazaars, nor the temples, nor the homes of the people, were fruitful to the watchers of the king; no sign was found in any place, of lurking members of the proscribed sect.

The king sat on his throne in the open court of the palace, and received the homage of the governors and princes.

They came in an endless stream, each striving to outvie the others in the number and magnificence of their retinues; they had been coming from the hour of the meridian, and the pomp and ceremony attending their submission to the arbiter of their lives and the dispenser of their fortunes, had of necessity made the day a weariness before the sun had set.

The king had ascended the dais whereon the throne was placed, at the time appointed, attended by a splendid throng of courtiers, and hedged about by soldiers in golden armor, and the dignitaries of his council. All things were in accordance with the usual manner of the imposing function; the intricate marshaling of the changeful hosts was accomplished as it should be, and the differing phases of the spectacle were marked with a smooth and rhythmic precision;—and yet the king frowned moodily.

At frequent intervals he glanced away from those around him, and scanned the multitude with anxious eyes; his mind was oppressed with foreboding; the viper, fear, had stung him to the quick.

The first hour passed, but its passing brought no embassy from the cause of his miserable unrest.

The second hour, and the third, passed, and yet he waited.

The sunset came; the twilight fell, and the cressets flamed with efficient fires; the city was still brilliant, and the royal court dazzling.

Ahlmarath rose up and lifted his sceptre.

The courtiers drew back amazed, for it was a sign of prorogation, and the lords of the isles were but just arrived;—there would be murmurings in consequence, and the jealousies of the proud nobles would be aroused.

The royal body-guard flaming with jewels, and formidable in numbers, held their spears in horizontal lines, and pressed back the throngs to give space for the king's retirement.

At that moment, a haggard priest whose gray robe was torn, bedraggled, and disarranged, pushed his way with scant ceremony to the forbidden line, and threw himself upon his face at the foot of the dais.

"Mercy! Justice! Vengeance!" he gasped,—and swooned where he lay.

He was lifted up quickly, and hustled roughly into life again. The king's face blanched.

"Is this a messenger?" he asked;—"Whence came he?"

But the intruder was overcome by the strenuous exertion which an evidently long and rapid journey had subjected him to; his eyes rolled wildly in their sockets as soon as they were opened, and he stared about him like an imbecile.

In his right hand he held a small object with a deadly grip.

Instantly divining its import, an officer of the guard took it from him, risking the laceration of the rigid fingers, and gave it into the hands of one of the princes, who had started forward to intercept a possible danger to the king.

It was a tablet, containing a message.

The king trembled, but commanded it to be read aloud.

The message was from the chief custodian of the temple of Alpleh; and recited the terrors of its desecration.

It declared the object of the desecration to be the abduction of a vestal, and the guilt of the unpardonable crime was laid upon the shoulders of Candase, the youngest son of the king. It spoke of the active leadership of the king's cataphract, Shoza, the son of Hepsai; and told of the slaughter of innocent priests by the ruthless soldiers of the prince; told of the destruction of the sacred altars; of the horrid affront put upon the image of the god; of the devastating fire; and of the fall of the temple.

The king was aghast; but recovering himself, commanded the messenger to be brought before him.

"When was this?" he asked.

The priest answered falteringly: "This very day, gracious lord, between the morning and the afternoon."

"Were there no hooded serpents there? Heard you aught of Pallahmyhl?"

"Gracious lord, there was but one, a wanderer of that sect. The preacher has not dared to come so near the splendor of your throne."

"Nevertheless, *one* was there. What said he?"

"Nothing, gracious lord,—but slew the chief priest in the inner sanctuary, and cursed the name of Alpleh."

"Was he alone?"

At this question, the bearer of evil tidings paused in the eagerness of his communication, as if startled by a sudden recollection. Then he took courage and answered:

"Gracious lord, this pilgrim came to the temple with my lord's noble son, the prince Candase. When the alarm was given, I saw six others of the presumptuous sect, but they passed, in the conflict."

"They passed? Were no efforts made to take them?"

"Gracious lord, a priest from the inner circle thrust

upon the one who was with my lord's son, and strove to tear his mask away; but was stricken dead on the instant, by the poison marks upon his garment."

"Ha!—the serpents are loosed amongst us! Go aside, to the priests of Belus, yonder, and tell them what has befallen."

As the quaking messenger was led away, Ahlmarath turned to an officer who stood waiting the royal pleasure at the foot of the dais.

"Rhodas," he said, "what word from the gates?"

"Most gracious king," the officer replied," "no answer has been vouchsafed your majesty from the rebellious sect in Gedrosia, nor have any messengers appeared from the other regions affected by them.—Shall your majesty wait another hour?"

"The hour is passed," said the king. "Send for Vahltro, the general of the east, and for Mandaphral, the general of the south. Let them attend us immediately;—and see to it that the guards of the river-gates, and the garrisons of the outer terraces, are strengthened."

In a little while the generals appeared, and made their obeisance to the king; they were fully armed, and wore golden breastplates over their tunics.

The king addressed them with vehemence.

"Mandaphral," he said, "and you, Vahltro,—attend! The dark shadow of rebellion grows upon our skirts, and the hiss of the serpent is in the air. The moving cause of our disquiet is he who is the head and front of that most troublesome sect of our people, the Imaus. 'Tis Pallahmyhl; whose very name is an affront to us, and a menace to the peace of our kingdom. He is called the *Breaker of the Seals;*—his name of Pallahmyhl hath that interpretation. The sect are shunners of the light; they hide their faces

from the eyes of men; they go and come secretly, none know from whence, or to whither.

"Be it your instant and unremitting task, therefore, to search until you find. You shall bring the body of the preacher to the crypt of the temple of Belus, whether he be taken alive, or whether he be slain in the capture.

"Mark this well:—Pallahmyhl, alive, or dead, must be brought to the crypt before the day of the Feast of the Presentation."

The two generals exchanged glances.

"August king and master," said Mandaphral, "forgive your servants if their loyalty makes them seem presumptuous;—but—but—what of the noble prince, your son, whose entanglement in this most grave offense perplexes us, and hampers our judgment?"

"What of our son?—he shall be reprimanded. 'Tis but a thoughtless escapade he has adventured in, betrayed by youthful folly, and lured by a woman's charms. Take no heed of him; the preacher is the culprit."

"Candase, armed at the pillage of the temple,"—began Vahltro;—

"Silence!" said Ahlmarath, fiercely interrupting; "The king's son is above reproach. Go you at once, and do our bidding; use every stratagem; falter not; be alert! By day and by night, urge on the instruments of power and subtlety;—for there shall be no rest for you, until the body of Pallahmyhl is safe within the crypt."

The generals prostrated themselves, humbly acquiescent; then arose and departed, with the onwhirl of horses and the rumbling of chariots.

The court was broken up; the king and his suite left the dais, and amidst murmurings and dark forebodings retired into the palace.

The Feast of Homage was become a feast of mockery;

nevertheless, it was suffered to progress under the auspices of the king's eldest son, who held the sceptre to the end of it, filled with the delicious intoxication of an absolute, though brief, authority.

No pitying sleep visited the king that night.

CHAPTER XVI

THE destruction of the temple of Alpleh was followed by such a revelation of the secrets which it had harbored, that the people fled from the ruins appalled.

In their homes, they cowered, smitten with a deadly blight of doubting fears. It was as though every incentive to labor, every glimpse of prosperity, every assurance of the stability of things great and little,—and indeed, the very hopes which made existence tolerable,—had been wrenched away like the timbers of a rended raft, leaving them helpless, to perish in a stormy sea.

The tidings of the holocaust were carried far, and were garnished with new horrors at each repetition of them; before another sun had set, the destruction of the temple was a theme in the mouths of every dweller in the mountains, and a spasm of fear shook the communities and paralysed their senses.

With the fall of the temple, came a season of grim despair; and a grimmer apathy followed.

The sect of the Imaus vanished from the places they were used to frequent; like the morning dew before the rising sun, they were dissipated, and the glint of their familiar robes was seen no more in any place through all the land.

Their quick evanishment amazed the king, and he grew day by day more restless and afraid. Every instrument of power was used to achieve the discovery and capture of even the least of the mystic fraternity, but nothing came of the effort.

A hundred thousand men divided into a thousand companies of a hundred men each, had been sent with haste into all the provinces, and there manipulated with secrecy. Both in their proper habiliments, and in disguise, they had penetrated into the remotest corners of the kingdom and searched diligently in every place which could by any possibility shelter a man; and continued to search, and to wonder, and ultimately to curse their fate because their failure dimmed the prestige of their past achievements, and was a prohibition against their home return.

But the sect was disorganised; whether for a while only, or whether finally disbanded, and the bonds of their association dissolved, no one could say. Having kindled the fire which they believed would shortly sweep over the land and destroy the vital energy of the system they had plotted against, they burnt their robes in secret, and in secret fled to the unsuspected regions whence they had originally come.

The king was angry, as well as afraid; and the results of his displeasure were evidenced in a cruel manner.

The beautiful House of Hepsai was destroyed, and its contents given to pillage; all of its wide and complex appurtenances were leveled with the ground, and its gardens ravished.

Hepsai himself, however, being warned in time by some friendly message coming to him as from an unimpeachable source, escaped with his wife Thryahl and his three daughters, who took with them the leopard also; but Movis, the steward of his father, disdaining flight, was taken after making a bloody resistance with his armed slaves and devoted laborers.

Movis was taken to the city and imprisoned, together with his brothers Balan and Ahmad, whose bazaars were wrecked, and their contents seized; but Shoza, knowing

beforehand what was about to happen, withdrew himself in time to escape disgrace and probably death.

The haven to which the lord governor of Hesydrus had fled with the remnant of his family, was unknown, and the most diligent inquiries failed to betray it.

Candase, albeit the favorite and much loved son of the king, was, by the instigation of the venomous priests of Belus, put under the ban with the rest; his life was proclaimed forfeit, and the soldiers who had served him in his assault on the temple were deprived of their arms and sent into slavery in the islands of the Prasodis.

But the prince eluded capture.

After conducting the vestal in safety to her home, he had returned to his boat on the river, intending to forestall the flight of evil rumors to his father's court, and to throw himself upon the affectionate indulgence which he believed awaited him there.

An accident to his vessel, however, grave enough to necessitate an immediate landing at the nearest point available, caused him to spend the night on the shore while the mishap was being corrected; and in the morning,—so quickly had the wrath of the king been ignited,—there came a mounted slave through the adjacent gardens to warn him of his peril. He realised at once the danger, and recognising in it the handiwork of the priests who were inimical to him, he commanded his rowers to abandon the shallop to chance, and to disperse at once and save themselves.

He took the horse from the slave, who could manage very well without it; and securing a long garment from the boat in which to wrap himself from recognition, mounted, and entering a shadowy glade, was seen no more.

Thus, although the fall of Isyl was accomplished without provoking a sign from that much revered and peace-

able god, when Alpleh fell, it seemed to those of his remoter votaries,—those who had not witnessed with their own eyes the astounding proofs of his fraudulent character,—that Alpleh had taken vengeance on his enemies in full and overflowing measure. A great smoke went up from the temple, but it was not the smoke of incense. The people were distraught, but there was no oracle to encourage and reassure them.

And so the rift began. It was a small beginning, and at the first seemed only a trivial one; nevertheless the cloud of the old idolatry showed signs of breaking, and the flame of the burning temple was the first spark of the lightning in the advancing storm.

. . . . . .

In a rocky and desolate glen of the mountains, Prince Candase wandered alone, a fugitive from his father's wrath, and a stranger to the regions into which his evil fortune had led him.

Many days had elapsed since he had turned in flight from the river's bank, and many mishaps had befallen him.

First, his unfamiliarity with that part of the vale which lay upon the western bank of the river, caused him to go widely astray from the path which would have led him to the open plains; and then, after leaving every semblance of a dwelling far behind him, he found himself environed by a dense and gloomy forest, and perceived that the ground was steadily rising and becoming more and more broken and impracticable.

The night had almost fallen before he realised that he was separating himself from all help, and in the heavy twilight the additional horror of prospective starvation confronted him. Since early in the morning, he had tasted

no food, and he was hungry, and athirst, as well as weary and distracted.

In this dilemma, fortune gave him a helping hand.

He came suddenly on a cluster of woodcutters' huts, and, without being obliged by the strangeness of his appearance there, to offer any other explanation than that he had inadvertently wandered from his road, was furnished with ample refreshment; and afterwards provided with a bed of rushes, whereon he slept profoundly, until awakened by the bird songs of the next morning.

Resuming his dubious journey with such directions as his humble and kindly entertainers could impart for his further guidance, he found himself at noon near a shallow cataract of the river; but in crossing the swiftly flowing stream in order to reach the great road which he had been advised would lead him into the adjacent province, his horse stumbled, and was carried away almost before he could save himself from drowning.

He was in a miserable plight after that untoward accident, but the sun soon dried his garments, and before he was ready to proceed again, the natural buoyancy of his spirits came uppermost, and helped to make him look upon the mishap with philosophy.

The splendid quality of his habiliments suffered to some extent, but the garment which he had so fortunately taken from the boat on the instant of his leaving it, protected him both from recognition, and from the conjectures of a too great or troublesome curiosity. It was simply a long tunic of dark blue serge, reaching from the neck to the ankle and girdled with a leathern belt; his head was protected by a fez-like cap of fur; the jeweled dagger in his inner girdle was the only weapon he had.

Before night, he met a number of peasants on their way home from the fields, and was sheltered by them, as he

had been by the woodcutters, until the next day;—and so for several days he continued on, scarce knowing to what bourne he was approaching, and yet hardly conscious of the desperation of his state.

It was near the evening hour, when his wanderings seemed to have culminated in the midst of a dismal chaos of rocky precipices and stupendous crags, through which a hissing streamlet dashed noisily to other rushing but unseen waters below.

He sat down to rest on a shelving stone; and looked about him with a growing disquiet.

All at once he started;—was that an apparition?

The very first object which his eyes encountered was the figure of a venerable old man, with a great beard as white as snow sweeping to the girdle of his brown and tattered robe; he came from behind a pinnacle of rock in such an unexpected and abrupt way that Candase was at first inclined to look upon him as an illusion of his overwrought fancies.

The figure of the man was real, however, and after a short pause, during which he regarded the prince with a degree of fixedness which was almost disconcerting, he spoke.

"Sir," he said, "I perceive from your countenance and dress that you are a stranger in these parts."

Candase smiled.

"A stranger, indeed," he replied; "but if my judgment serves, I am addressed by one who is no less a stranger?"

"Your observation is a happy one," said the new comer; "and since you do not deny the truth of my conjecture, neither will I hesitate to confess myself a waif in an unknown country. We are strangers, both, it seems; and are met by chance where a comparison of our experiences may help us to a mutual advantage."

"Let us hope it will. For my own part, I scarcely know even from whence I came; having been snared in a wilderness, and made to wander aimlessly up and down, forsaken by the gods, and harassed by the devils. Perhaps you are less befogged than I, and at least know your way?"

"Indeed," responded the old man, looking about him dubiously, "our cases are so exactly similar, that I do not know where I am. Yesterday, my path was plain enough, for I remembered having seen some portions of it before; in the night, however, I was attacked by a bear, and escaped his clutches only by a hair's breadth, leaping a torrent, and losing the thread of my journey past recovery. Still, I do not despair, for I am somewhat versed in the signs of the stars, and hope when it is night, to gather from them an idea of my vicinage. Meanwhile, if you will permit me, I will rest on this stone, and afterwards guide you into safety."

"Sir," said Candase, "you are infinitely obliging, and I thank you sincerely. Perhaps the gods will remember us for the odds and ends of virtue we may have shown them in the past, and enlighten our understanding."

"Which gods are they?" asked the old man, as he seated himself on a flat stone opposite the prince; his tone and manner verged on the contemptuous.

"Why,—the coördinate and superserviceable gods, of course," answered Candase lightly; "for in so paltry an affair as this, it would be a presumption,—an egregious folly,—to appeal to Belus."

"Appeal to the stars, rather. The gods and their images are but the fantasies of men, and Belus himself is no whit greater than the least of them, albeit his image is of massy gold, and his servants are numberless. Consider:—the stars in the heavens are incorruptible, and their influence is gracious."

While his vis-a-vis was speaking, Candase watched his face with a peculiar interest; when he had finished,—

"Sir," said the prince; "I ask your indulgence for what may seem to you to be an impertinent curiosity on my part; but although it is quite impossible that we have ever met before, there is something in your eyes which piques my memory, and your voice sounds strangely familiar."

"It will doubtless surprise you, then, to hear that I am similarly moved on beholding you," replied the old man; "indeed, I can go a step farther, and say that I know you very well."

Candase was startled.

"What is your name?" he asked, rising.

"Carmyhl;" was the reply.

He carefully removed the grizzled locks from his head, unloosed the fastening of his patriarchal beard, and threw open his tunic; no further proofs were necessary, and the prince embraced him, laughing.

"We are masquers, both," said Candase; "and of the same complexion. But it was thought you were far from here;—as far, indeed, as Gedrosia; and joined with the mystical sect of the Imaus."

"And so I was,—and am."

"We learned of your welfare but the other day, through the lips of one Phral, a pilgrim of that sect. He showed us your message,—and incidentally slew one of your father's slaves, being provoked to it by an attempt to approach his person too closely. A dangerous messenger, Carmyhl,—it was a peril even to be within arm's reach of him."

"The poisoned hood is the only defense permitted them, and it responds to a touch with the quickness of lightning; 'tis a necessity."

"And was it necessity which caused your famous preacher to put himself in jeopardy as your messenger?"

"How mean you, prince?"

"Why, Phral was but another name for Pallahmyhl."

"Ha! Whence gathered you that knowledge? Have you seen the preacher, so-called?—have you seen Pallahmyhl?"

"No; but your brother Shoza knew him."

"True; Shoza was with you in the temple. Our leader had a purpose of his own to serve in going there, and came, indeed, disguised, to be my messenger; to see with his own eyes, and to hear with his own ears, the things which were transpiring under the shadow of the god Alpleh. For he had marked that god,—*Alpleh was the first seal.* But tell me, Candase, do you know what has befallen my people?"

"You alarm me, Carmyhl,—I am a fugitive from the wrath of the king, and have had no tidings from the living world;—what has happened?"

"Dreadful things, prince, but I will take a dreadful vengeance in requital. My father's house was pillaged and destroyed, and its fair gardens desolated. My brothers Movis, and Balan, and Ahmad, are in prison in the king's city, but Shoza escaped, and is a fugitive like ourselves. My father, and mother, and—"

"Carmyhl!" exclaimed the prince, starting to his feet and showing signs of a horrified astonishment; "Your house destroyed? Your family imprisoned? Your sisters Phyloprase, and Shalzamene, and—and—"

"They are safe, dear friend, despite the machinations of the priests, who,—devils!—clamored for their sacrifice. I was warned of their peril in time, and came swiftly to their rescue in the guise you have seen me abandon. I placed them all in safety; and was on my return to the haunts I know of,—to the field and the strife of my en-

deavor,—when I haply missed my way and found my dearest friend."

"And I mine, Carmyhl,—and yet you rack my soul with this most shocking intelligence. Fool that I am, I believed that all was well excepting only with us, who fought iniquity and so invited some requital. But where is this hiding-place? —this haven of security?"

"We are in the very shadow of it; only yesterday, I left the remnant of my family housed in perfect safety. What say you,—shall I take you there for a harbor until your affair is mended? As for myself, I must hasten to my own."

"Take me there, I implore you. But is there room enough? Dare I venture to disturb them?"

"There is room enough," said Carmyhl, "and even if you had your hundred fine attendants with you, each with his slave, and all of them with their insatiable appetites, there would still be room enough."

"You surprise me. In what temple, or palace, are they harbored?"

"In a house of a thousand chambers. I will take you there as soon as the stars have given me my course."

"The stars are shining now," said the prince, uneasily.

"Yes, but not brightly enough; the twilight lingers."

While they waited for the brighter starlight, Candase asked of Carmyhl some explanation of the latter's recent singular course; why all things had changed with him, since the celebration of his majority. But Carmyhl demurred, saying that he could not enlighten him without violating a very binding, and even sacred, obligation.

"Ask me what you will," he said, "excepting what I have become, why I am strange, and unlike the happy comrade you knew before that night. Neither ask of the bourn to which I hasten; nor of the treasure I ex-

pect to find. Excepting these four things, which for the present must remain in secret, you shall know all; for I am yours in all frankness and truth, as ever."

"Forgive me, Carmyhl," the prince answered; "I need nothing to assure me that whatever the fortune is which holds and leads you, it cannot be an evil one, since you are willing, and even zealous, under its charge. But aside from your personality in the matter, can you tell me what is the ultimate aim and end of that swiftly growing, yet highly perplexing and elusive sect of the Imaus, of which you are believed to be a member?"

"Yes. Our ultimate aim and end is the altar of Belus."

"The altar of Belus! Why, the heavens will fall!"

"So much the better; if the heavens fall, we may walk amidst the stars, and defy the Beast in his gilded charnel house. There is blood upon the steps of the altars, Candase,—I have seen it;—not the blood of goats and heifers, but the blood of virgins. The orgies in the secret chambers of the temples make devils of men;—and to what place, other than hell, can the devils lead the multitude? The beauty, and grace, and charm, of the outward, visible worship of that deity, hide abominations within, which are unspeakable."

"You have discovered much, in a little while;" said Candase, becoming grave, with a gravity which was new to him.

"Many things have been shown me," continued Carmyhl, "though the time has been short. I could lacerate your heart with a recital of happenings between the rising of the sun and its setting, but I forbear. This much, however, I will tell you: we war against three monstrous evils; which are, the sensuality of the temple ministrants, their reckless and insatiable greed, and their exactions of money from the poor.

"Of these three evils, the third is the greatest. For if the poor are fascinated by mysteries and splendors of which they are merely spectators, and not in any sense participants, and in that state of glamour are robbed with impunity,—they not daring to remonstrate against what is to them a holy and infallible system,—then the poor are reft of strength, reft of ambition, reft of hope, even, and they perish miserably.

"Thousands yield up their wretched pittance to the priests through stress of superstitious fears,—and die of starvation afterward. The rich are harassed, indeed, but the poor are slain outright."

"But, Carmyhl, if things are at so desperate an ebb, how can virtue survive?"

"Good and evil are in all men, but there is more of good than of evil, and for that reason the world is saved from eclipse. Nevertheless, if the evil is suffered to grow unchecked, the good is overcome by it, and falters, and is finally swept away. It is to prune the evil tendencies of the powers which have grown to such monstrous proportions, that the wise men in the background have organised the Imaus;—to rend the veil of superstitition; to abolish reliance on mere symbols; to purify the atmosphere; and to prove the folly of a faith in riddles."

"And shall you destroy the temples?"

"No; but we shall cleanse them. The insatiate and pretentious gods must yield to the scrutiny of eyes which wink at no deceit; the false gods must be overthrown; Belus himself must answer."

"Are you so numerous? Have you such power?"

"We are more numerous than the priestly power,—more numerous, even, than the king's power."

"You will throw us into chaos."

"On the contrary, it is from the chaos of the present that we shall rescue all the people."

"Carmyhl, I am astonished. Your metamorphosis is complete."

"My metamorphosis? Into what?"

"An enigma."

Carmyhl laughed; he perceived at once that the prince was only half convinced of the things he spoke of. But glancing upward at the moment, he arose and advanced a little way in order to get a better view of the heavens, which were now brilliantly gemmed with stars. After a while,—

"There is Altair, in the Eagle's wing," he said; "and there shines Rho, in the Scorpion's tail. We are nearer to the place we seek than I had thought; and if you are ready to adventure through the darkness, we can leave this desolate place at once."

Candase having signified his willingness to make the attempt, Carmyhl resumed his disguise of an old man, and when it was adjusted to his own satisfaction, much to the amusement of the prince, they carefully groped their way from the vicinity of the torrent, and entered what seemed to be an exceedingly narrow defile of the mountains.

Their course was now a very precarious one, and the intense darkness made it impossible to see the objects cumbering the way; they were obliged to feel before them at every step, and at almost every other step to pause and consider before they dared to move forward.

Necessarily, their progress was slow; it was dangerous also, for they could not tell how near they might be to the edge of some crevice of the ground, or some treacherous abyss whose jaws would never give them up were they to make a single false step.

Carmyhl was sanguine, however, and encouraged the prince to follow him by repeated assurances of an ultimate deliverance from their perilous surroundings.

"This groping in the dark," he said, as they picked their way, tortoise-like, between the rocks and brambles, "is like the quest I am engaged in. All is black; if but the slightest traces of a path were here, I could not see them. The only thing of which I am certain, is the direction in which we crawl."

"You have a marvelous gift," said the prince, "since it enables you to dispense with eyes in a region where eyes are more desirable than hands. You have looked on the stars to some purpose."

"I love the stars. Since I was a child I have watched them and marked their positions in the heavens; in all the seasons, I have taken note of their ways, and remembered them. I need but to look upon twelve of any of the stars,—remembering their season,—and I can tell to a certainty by their relation one to the other, not only the cardinal points, but, by means of the twelfth star, which I will find remote from the others, I am equally certain of the ground I stand upon."

"Wonderful!" said Candase, laughing; "I feel my insufficiency stronger, with every word you utter; had we not met this day, I would have perished miserably where you found me."

"What!—would the gods have permitted the favorite son of the lord king to die so ignobly?"

"The king's favorite son is hiding from his father's just anger; and as to the inclination of the gods,—Carmyhl, hear me:—I abjure the gods."

"Noble sentiment! Will you join my company?"

"In the degree of sympathy, yes. In active participation, I dare not."

"Why, Candase?"

"Because I am the king's son, and I love my father."

"You do well," said Carmyhl; "for your father is in great and imminent peril. Tell me, Candase,—when is the Feast of the Presentation?"

"On the ninth day of the sixth month. It is a little less than a month hence."

After this, nothing more was said by either until they had groped their way over what seemed to them a very considerable distance. All at once, Carmyhl announced that he perceived an indication of some opening, or widening, of their tortuous pathway,—a standing apart of its beetling walls; for a gray and spectral light was beginning to manifest itself in front of them. In a short time, they saw a great rift in the towering rocks before and above them, and beyond it, a space of midnight sky in which a half moon hung like a silver bowl.

Their way was visible at last, and they emerged from the defile into the light.

They found themselves in a kind of amphitheatre, walled for the greater portion of its circumference by immense trees, which proved that they were in the confines of a forest. At one side, a comparatively clear space, like an alley, was perceived, extending farther on in the same general direction as that which they had been following.

They entered the alley, and began to ascend the path which they found there; it was very steep, but Carmyhl expressed great satisfaction with the outcome of their hitherto somewhat dubious journey, and even declared that their viewless course had shortened it surprisingly.

"In a few minutes," he said, "we shall be at the gate of refuge. 'Tis but the rear gate, seldom used except by menials, but it must serve."

"If it leads to paradise," said the prince, "what matters

it whether it is the narrow way of slaves, or the broad portal of their masters? Once in paradise, we shall forget our mode of entering it."

"It is a barren paradise—"

"But—Dahlymel;—is she not there?"

"Dahlymel is there, with Phyloprase, and Shalzamene, and our dear parents; but 'tis an abode fit only for culprits, and its single virtue consists in its perfect safety."

"Whether a rocky cave of the mountains, or a gilded chamber in the palace of princesses," said Candase, "if Dahlymel is there, it is paradise. Carmyhl, I have never shown my love to the fair vestal,—the loveliest of all women,—because I deemed it wrong to whisper of it, even, while she was in bonds to her sacred calling. Now that she is released,—"

"Now that she is released, you will rob us of our one perfect jewel," interrupted Carmyhl; "but regard me as a brother, Candase, for I think I know your heart."

"So be it,—and the gods ratify it;" Candase said, embracing him.

"Still harping on the gods?"

" 'Twas the last string; and the music of the broken chord is havened in the name of Dahlymel."

"I fear you will prove a most convincing lover."

"Why?—Does your acquiescence come reluctant?"

"Brother!—I meant that you will win before we are ready to relinquish. Nevertheless, love is not subject to others' whims, and I am glad for your sake."

"What I am, and not what my lips express, shall woo for me," said Candase, earnestly.

"I wish you all happiness, then.—But see; yonder, to the right, do you observe that towering cliff against the mountain?"

"Yes; it is like a monstrous crag which has slipped,

from the heights and now stands upright on its edge, ready to fall upon us."

"And at the base, mark what a confusion of slabs and bowlders, piled as from an earthquake"

"Yes; a dangerous and unstable place for walking, and doubtless full of pitfalls. Let us avoid it."

"If we avoid it, we miss our chance of paradise;—amongst this piled up litter, is the door I spoke of."

"The door? But I see no house, or inclosure, even."

"Both are here; yet neither could be found by a stranger, searched he never so diligently with the brightest sunshine aiding him. Sit here upon this ledge, for a while, and I will call the guardian spirit."

As Candase seated himself, wondering, Carmyhl went forward a little way, climbed upon a low shelving crag which jutted out from a confused mass of huge upright stones, and disappeared behind one of them.

After a brief space he reappeared, and, joining the prince, seated himself by his side.

"I have made the signal," he said, "but because the house is so vast in its extent, and the present whereabouts of its custodian probably far from the vicinity of this particular gate, we shall have to wait his coming."

"I am becoming familiarised with marvels," answered Candase, "and await more of them with impatience."

"When you are once fairly within this stronghold," proceeded Carmyhl, "you will think yourself in a palace of enchantment. But now, dear prince, before we part—"

"Part? Do you not accompany me?"

"I cannot. I must return to my place at once. I wish you to grant me a favor, Candase,—to make me a promise."

"Speak, brother, I promise all you ask, knowing beforehand the quality of your inclination."

"It is, that you shall make approaches to your father at once, and be reconciled to him. This I ask in all earnestness, both for your own sake, and his. You must be reconciled before the day of the Feast of Presentation. He loves you, and will forgive your essay in the cause of love when he knows how it came about. Remember,—*before* the Feast;—as soon as possible."

"Your request so nearly chimes with my own half-formed resolve," answered Candase, "that I promise willingly, and will leave no means untried for its accomplishment. But why do you lay such stress upon the time of the Feast, Carmyhl? Is evil brooding?"

"Do not ask me, I pray you. I have already told you more than is known to any other man without the pale of the Imaus. A time of change is at hand. Retribution, like a captive tiger unchained, will leap at once from its long confinement. Upon the day of the Feast of the Presentation,—remember, Candase, brother,—*stand by your father's side.*"

Before the prince could reply, a deep voice which seemed to issue from the shadow of the under cliff a little to the right of where they were sitting, came out with startling abruptness, and caused them to rise involuntarily.

"Who calls?" asked the voice.

"The son of Hepsai," answered Carmyhl.

"Who else?"

"His friend, seeking refuge."

"With whom?"

"With birds of prey, but not with praying birds."

A discordant laugh from the shadow, proved an understanding.

Then came a series of short, snapping sounds, at their very feet; and before the prince could fully recover from his amazement, a narrow rift of yellow light as high as a

man's head, opened in the rocks before them, and a hideous and fear-inspiring dwarf stepped out and confronted them.

It was Gryp, of the White Vultures.

He showed no signs of surprise at seeing his whilom prisoner and guest, but waited for him to speak.

"On my way hence," said Carmyhl, "I chanced upon this gentleman, who is a very dear friend of mine, and a friend of my family. He is a fugitive from the affair of the temple, and seeks harbor for a space, until he can find reconciliation with the powers. Not for long, but for a little while. Take him to my father, Gryp, and apprise my sisters of his presence. He will tell you more, if you wish, but as you love me, so regard him."

"He is welcome," said the dwarf, looking with a kindly expression in his great eyes, on the prince; "and shall be served even as his friend is served. By what name shall I call you, sir?"

"Call me Candase, and accept my thanks for your courtesy," answered the prince.

"I am proud to serve you both."

"All's well, Gryp?" questioned Carmyhl, before parting; " 'tis but a day since I left you at this gate,—since I parted from those who are very dear to me,—yet I am troubled on account of them, and fear I know not what."

"They are well, noble excellency, and no harm can approach them; it is the weight of other things, oppresses you."

"Perhaps;—for when I am not blazing with impatient fires, I am freezing with the ice of inaction."

"So is the master; and rages often, accusing the Imaus of idleness. The Vultures also, who note the frowns upon his face, are becoming uneasy; and if the time drags over-

much, they will begin to fret in earnest. What shall I say?"

"Say that Pallahmyhl commands a strict adherence to the compact; and will make amends for this seeming delay in a victory more great and comprehensive than any he has dreamed of."

"But has that mystical lord,—that Pallahmyhl who has come upon us like the lightning,—set no time?"

"The time is nearly ripe," answered Carmyhl; "and the message which I gave from Pallahmyhl to Plahdron, yesterday, is a simple one. Urge him to remember, and to abide by it. A simple message, Gryp,—only to wait for the day of the Feast of Presentation.—And now I must go. Word shall be sent before many days have passed, as to the matters which concern us all. Facilitate my friend in his effort towards the reconciliation I spoke of. Guard those I love, and imbue them with patience. Farewell."

He embraced the prince, and then without another word turned and reëntered the path which led beyond; the twilight of the morning was beginning to show itself; the stars were paling.

"Come," said Gryp, stepping within the rift of yellow light.

Candase followed him, and the unseen door closed upon them both.

CHAPTER XVII

In a spacious chamber whose ceiling and walls were hidden by masses of silken drapery, vari-colored and ethereal looking, and whose floor was covered with shining white porcelain, the three daughters of Hepsai sat together on a morning two weeks subsequent to Candase's arrival.

Though the morning was far advanced, the light which streamed through the arched openings along one side of the chamber was unaccompanied with heat, and the air was cool and delicious.

Almost every luxury in the shape of furniture and adornment was there, including musical instruments, bowls of fragrant flowers, and even a beautiful broad basined fountain of sparkling water, which tossed itself up and down, and splashed continuously within its silver rim.

The chamber was one of many which the White Vultures kept in reserve, for guests of distinction awaiting the conclusion of negotiations for their ransom; but in this instance, it had been set apart with several other connecting ones, for the refuge of the lord governor and his family.

It was situated just above the pillared gallery in which Carmyhl had met his fate, and the grand court below could be seen with ease from one side of it, merely by drawing apart the heavy curtains which hung there. From the long row of latticed openings on the opposite side, a glimpse of the sky, and of a number of mountain peaks, could be had.

The sisters were clad in purple, for they mourned for Mithreb; and mourned for all their brothers.

Phyloprase and Shalzamene were disposed side by side on the same luxurious divan; but Dahlymel sat a little apart, being preoccupied and more distrait than the others. Hyla, the faithful leopard, lay asleep at her feet.

A slave entered, and announced the approach of the prince, who followed almost immediately.

The rare personal beauty of Candase was much enhanced by white silken robes which his host had provided in lieu of the somewhat tattered mantle he had made his escape in; and as he approached the lovely vestal and stood by her side a moment, they made a charming picture of youth and love.

The leopard raised his head, looked on the visitor approvingly, then went to sleep again.

The sisters received their guest with the informality and affection of long friendship. Phyloprase arose and placed a trivet for him in a place convenient for conversation, and when he was seated, asked him if anything new had transpired in his affair since the preceding day.

"So many things have come to my knowledge since yesterday," he responded, "that I hardly know which one to choose first in telling them. Five messengers from different quarters of the kingdom have confided their several scripts with the kindly dragon who guards us, between the meridian of yesterday and the morning of today."

"Five messengers, and all arriving at the same time!" said Shalzamene; "'tis a very strange happening, and doubtless full of import. Let us help you, Candase,—begin with the first message, and then with the rest as they came to you."

"That is a happier suggestion than you think, dear sister," he answered; "for the first messenger came from our brother Shoza."

"Oh, dear, bright Shoza!" exclaimed Dahlymel, all at once showing a vivid interest; "tell us he is safe and well, and far from discovery by the wicked priests; oh, tell us that, and it will lighten our sorrows."

"I will tell you more than that, sweet lotus flower,—Shoza has been forgiven by the king, and is now fully reinstated in the proud company he ruled so well; Shoza is once more captain of the cataphracts."

"Oh, what joyous news! And will he come to us?"

"Not for many days yet; his services are needed in the city for the present, and so also are those of the temple soldiers, the especial guards of Belus. The same messenger brings intelligence that Movis, and Balan, and Ahmad, have been released from prison, and indemnified for their losses by the king himself. This is most surprising news, for your family are held to be inimical to Belus."

"Your first message is indeed a happy one," said Phyloprase, "because it removes a part of our grief. And the second one, Candase,—what does it import?"

"The second messenger comes from the Patriarch of the Gymnosophists, and his script is scarcely intelligible to my ignorance. It speaks of a star, which was eclipsed by another at some far remote period; and urges me to be prepared for the consequences which are ordained to follow shortly. It is not definite in regard to the character of the thing which is impending, but I think from what I have read, that some tremendous convulsion is hinted at; —a convulsion of our kingdom in a great rebellion."

"And who shall rebel, think you,—and why?"

"The sect of the Imaus; who already disturb the land. They seek the overthrow of the gods."

"Our brother Carmyhl is one of them."

"Carmyhl is one, 'tis true; and no less true than mysterious. For why should Carmyhl have embraced the secret faith and dark machinations of that sect? Was he not happy enough, and free enough, but he must forsake the surety of peace, with all its golden promises, for the dubious advantages of a life in another sphere of action? I am much amazed, and know not what to think."

"Carmyhl has left us," said Phyloprase, "but our father assures us that he is nobly occupied, and that he will return to us some day, bringing a treasure of knowledge beyond price."

"Knowledge of what, I pray you?"

"Our father will not tell us. He says 'tis not to be spoken of, at present; that it is wonderful; that the nature of it is holy,—even vital to existence."

"So I have heard from Carmyhl's messengers; Carmyhl himself, I am convinced, would not divulge his secret."

"Nevertheless," said Shalzamene, "we do not feel anxiety for our younger brother, but rather are prone to anticipate from him some happy tidings of things we scarce dare whisper of."

"Carmyhl is brave, and will accomplish all," said Dahlymel; "nothing can daunt him; and he will come to us a victor, bringing gladness."

"So let us hope," said the prince; "but let us not anticipate.—The third message is disquieting. It is to the effect that a conspiracy has been formed against the king by my most unnatural brothers, the purpose of which is to assassinate him and place the crown on the head of his brother, Myrhitra, our uncle; who, it seems, has suddenly made his appearance to some, after long years of retirement. A division of the kingdom is contemplated by

them; in the consummation of which, my brothers will be vested each with a kingly authority over one of the countries which now pay tribute to us, and each of them will thus become a king apart. It is a scheme devised by devils;—and a bitter and relentless war is sure to be precipitated."

"Oh,—oh, what dreadful tidings!" said Dahlymel.

"But they shall not affect you, sweet rose, nor cause you a moment's disquiet. And now for pleasanter news; the fourth messenger is from the court. 'Tis a glorious message, indeed, and one which lightens my heart of its one gnawing grief;—'tis from my father. He has forgiven me, and made proclamation everywhere that he desires my return to him at once, with the assurance of his love and protection."

"That is a gracious and joyful message;" said Phyloprase; "and though 'twill take you from us, and so rob us of all the pleasure we know, yet it calls with love's wistfulness, and must not be made to plead.—But you have still another message, Candase,—the last one?"

"Yes. The fifth message is from Carmyhl."

"From Carmyhl?"

The sisters rose to their feet simultaneously, and stood with visible agitation before the prince, who arose also, surprised by that exhibition of feeling. The leopard was disturbed, and began pacing to and fro up and down the apartment with his head drooping, as was his wont when unusual incidents transpired which did not require a closer attention.

"Where is Carmyhl?" asked Dahlymel, who was the first to speak.

"He is safe and well. Dear sisters, why do you tremble and show such signs of apprehension? Our Carmyhl is in no jeopardy."

Dahlymel approached, and placing both hands on his breast, looked up in his face beseechingly.

"Candase," she said, "you have promised to be to me as the god Isyl—was;—and more. Tell us, then, all the truth. For Carmyhl's ambassador, the old man who saved us out of our beautiful lost home, and brought us here to wait for happier days, told us that his next message would be the last, because of a dreadful storm that would shake the land before the new moon came again. And he said that afterward, he would come to us. Oh, tell us,—what is the nature of this storm?"

"Candase," supplemented Shalzamene, "we implore you!"

"Be armed, then;" said the prince; "and let no idle fears distract you, however grim the intelligence I impart; my own knowledge is scant, for this message contains my only enlightenment.

"It says that Pallahmyhl, who seems to have been invested with supreme authority over the Imaus, will shortly take the field with a multitude of devoted followers, armed and equipped for immediate and relentless war; that an assault will be made simultaneously on a thousand shrines and temples of the gods, great and little; that the priests will be slain upon their altars, and the idols destroyed; that the sacred groves will be burned; and that every vestige of our ancient religion will be eliminated unscrupulously, and without fear of threatened vengeance from the unseen world.

"This is the substance of the message; with the addition that the overthrow of Belus is the ultimate end to which the fury of the uprising is devoted. Carmyhl will be in the midst of the great strife, and Pallahmyhl will lead it in person, no longer as a preacher, but as a warrior mailed, and irresistible.

"The message ends by urging my immediate submission to the king, and my faithfulness to the throne; whose safety is imperiled only from traitors in the household of the princes.

"From this, you will perceive that my place is at my father's side, and that my strength is against my brothers. 'Tis a horrible predicament, but my duty needs no expounding."

"And are these horrors imminent?" asked Phyloprase.

"The day is set; 'tis near."

"Oh, woe! How shall we live, pent up and helpless? Do you keep nothing back?—Is it to-morrow?"

"No, not to-morrow; nor yet for many morrows, though all too soon. And now, I must go. I must leave you for a space, while the tempest breaks and rages. Afterward, I will come to you, and bring our Carmyhl with me. I will search him out, and guard him, for your sakes; and Shoza shall be with me in the midst, and through it all."

"But, Candase!" said Dahlymel, clinging fast to him; "we shall die of suspense and fright. Is it so necessary that you should leave us? Can you not send a message to your father, warning him of danger?—oh, consider! The king should invoke great Belus. Surely, though Isyl and Alpleh were false and wicked gods, Belus himself is good, and all powerful. 'Twas Belus, certainly, who condemned those two to destruction beforehand, knowing well their perfidy. And if that awful deity is in a gracious mood, then you need not fear for your father's safety, nor for the outcome of the frightful vagaries of a few madmen who presume to set the grievances of the people to rights. Belus will scorch them with fire from heaven, and scatter them to their homes again, discouraged, and repentant.—And so, you need not go."

Candase smiled. He looked down upon her lovingly.

and then raised his eyes to the two sisters, who were dumb, and greatly perturbed; it appeared to them as if all things were doomed to a speedy destruction.

Phyloprase, answering the prince's look, said gently:

"If we could keep you with us, dear prince, without jeopardising your honor, or adding to the reasonable solicitude of your most noble and august father, we would join our voices in prayer that you should never leave us. But your place is at your father's side; our dear, but too fond Dahlymel, forgets the primal duty of a son when she pleads for your delay,—but 'tis the voice of love which speaks, and love is ever selfish, being all in all with itself. Nevertheless, after you have gone, she will love you all the more because of your courage; and, doubtless after shedding abundance of tears, will proudly think and speak of you."

At this moment, three slaves in the livery of the White Vultures, entered the chamber and prostrated themselves before the prince. Rising, one of them said:

"Noble sir, we are sent to conduct you to the gate, where a suitable escort is in waiting to accompany you to the city. Our lord Plahdron beseeches you to make haste before the day grows late; and commands us to say that your noble excellency shall be safely conducted by the nearest course, and that before midnight, his supreme highness, your august father, shall welcome you in the royal palace."

"So be it," said the prince; "lead, and I will follow."

But the parting with Dahlymel was an ordeal which tried to the uttermost, his strength of will, and the unknown quality of his fortitude.

Phyloprase and Shalzamene clasped his hands in a brief pressure, then turned away. The leopard stood motionless, and regarded the scene with inscrutable eyes; he

knew, or seemed to know, that some dread calamity was impending.

Dahlymel reached up and clasped her arms about her lover's neck, and gazing upon his face through her tears, strove to speak, but could not.

Candase trembled; then caught the lovely vestal to his bosom, pressing her with passionate fervor to his heart; he kissed the tears from her eyes, then held her from him in a brief distraction;—then drew her close again, and kissing her upon the lips, fled swiftly out of the chamber.

A heavy and boding silence ensued, broken only by the musical plash of the dancing fountain; Dahlymel's sobs were smothered where she lay weeping on the divan.

In a while, a door at the opposite end of the chamber was opened, and the lord governor, Hepsai, appeared. The leopard bounded towards him and fawned upon him with every demonstration of affection.

Hepsai approached slowly, and seated himself upon a trivet by the divan; his daughters received him in silence.

"The prophecy grows to fruition," he said; "in a little while the branches of the tree will be naked, and the tree itself uprooted."

Phyloprase, recovering first from the grievous depression into which the prince's departure had plunged the sisters, besought her father to tell them what he knew of Carmyhl's real position; and he, not only willing, but anxious to enlighten them, replied at once.

"The time is come, indeed," he said, "for your enlightenment; sit close, my daughters, and mark attentively.

"In the times past, we deemed ourselves happy and contented in the protecting love and the efficient power and wisdom of the gods we worshipped. To us, they seemed all-sufficient, and we rested confidingly in the promises of their ministrants, not doubting but that our numberless

appeals were heard and answered, and believing that a place was reserved for us in the celestial kingdom.

"Our days were bright, and no serious troubles embarrassed us; the seasons were kind, our substance was multiplied, the future was full of promise, and in the present we found a perpetual joy. We gave thanks to the gods, propitiating them often, with gifts; and we observed unremittingly all the feasts ordained by the priests of the temple, and those of the lesser altars whenever they transpired.

"To the gods, we attributed all our blessings.

"Nevertheless, the gods were false; and if we had never known them, we would have been as happy in our ignorance as they have been pampered by our devotion.

"Many times in the past,—even before children blessed my house,—my heart has yearned for something upon which my soul could appease the hunger of its desire. As it was then, my superficial mind was content with the subtleties and mysteries appealing to it through the eyes and ears; and since it is a necessary quality in the mere existence of a man that he should worship the spirit which is unseen excepting in holy symbols, it was but natural that my fancies should be satisfied with what was held to be sacred by other men;—satisfied with what was easily obtainable; with what was pleasant to the senses; with what appeared to be the only obtainable blessing, and the only haven of rest.

"But yet my soul was dissatisfied; my soul was disquieted. I perceived that the ways of the gods tended to foolishness, and were smooth, or rough, in proportion as the gifts of propitiation were great, or little; and were marked by an unvarying lust for luxury and power, which at no time melted into sympathy with grief and poverty.

"I perceived that their powers were limited, instead of being omniscient; that the things they professed to accomplish divinely, and by the unsearchable agency of a spiritual and occult prescience, were merely the things which men could accomplish quite as well without the glamour of any accessories. I perceived that the gods were overrated; that they were but the figured embodiment of imaginary and discordant forces, emanating from the minds of men; that they were intrenched in dubious mysteries; and that they derived their ascendancy over the people from the cunning of their ministrants, the priests,—especially the more astute of the chief priests, those dark and secret emissaries of power.

"My soul was disquieted; for I said to myself, These are not veritable gods, for they are no whit wiser than myself; and have failed utterly to touch my spirit.

"But the fashion nurtured by the ages is strong, and I was reluctant to draw away from the holy places, after so long and sincere a devotion.

"Then came to me one day a man of the Gymnosophists, bearing a message from the father of his sect. He was close, and secret; but the message he imparted was one of strange purport, not only proving the truth of my presentiments, but holding forth a promise of light, by which to find the way to freedom.

"As witness:—A prophet of old declared in many places, and secretly,—but only to the humbler dwellers in the mountains,—that on the occurrence of a certain wonder in the heavens, a child would be born whose destiny it was to show all men the way to the only true and omnipotent god.

"The wonder transpired in accordance with the prophecy: the star Vio was eclipsed by Ra in the hour of midnight, and in the self-same instant, a child was born.

"The child was Carmyhl."

"Father!" exclaimed the sisters in a breath.

"Yes, dear children, our own Carmyhl; and it was on the night of his vigil near the Black Cavern, that he was led from us to the fulfillment of the things prophesied of.

"It was necessary to keep this knowledge from the light until the time was ripe for declaring it, lest the powers of evil should take cognisance, and imperil all. But now, the hour is come, and your brother is doubtless under the aegis of that unknown god to whom the promise leads.

"When the storm of the conflict is over; when the horrors which are inevitable, have ceased; when the hideous incubus which has brooded over the land until death itself has become preferable to further existence under it, shall have been lifted and dispersed;—then will Carmyhl return to us, and ease our hearts of doubt."

"But, father, can these things be?" asked Shalzamene; "is it possible that the whole universe has until now been deceived? Recall the happy days when we danced in the groves of the temples, and when Alpleh received our missives at the altar, and gave us back answers to them, freely. Recall how peaceful and bright were the days when Isyl sat in our midst and smiled upon our labors, defending us from sickness, and insuring us prosperity and contentment."

"Our imaginations deceived us," answered her father; "and the assault upon the temple of Alpleh resulted, as you know, in bringing to light the proofs of such fraud and villainy as made even the ignorant and debased grow pale with fear, and sick with a deadly fever of doubt and despair.

"Remember the hollow body of the image of Alpleh, with its staircase leading to the lips whence the oracles were wont to be given forth;—a man spoke the words through

a cunning instrument, so made as to change and magnify the natural voice. And remember those very petitions of which you speak; petitions which you and others have written and placed upon the altars, returning the next day for the answers to them, ready prepared;—what, beside the missives, did you lay there?

"Only a little piece of gold.

"The humbler worshippers had only silver to give, but they gave it; the abject and poverty stricken could scarce accumulate enough of copper to keep themselves alive,—but they gave their copper. Gave it in the belief that it was for the assuagement of others' more pressing wants; for the relief of sickness; for distribution amongst the infirm and incapable.

"Yet what was found behind the crumbling altars when the fires were cooled?—what was found in the very sanctuary?

"Gold, and silver, and copper, in sufficient quantities to pay for a whole year's feasting of a village!

"We, ourselves, have been fortunate; but as for the people who dwelt around us, the scourge of sickness, and pain, and sorrow, has not been lifted from their quivering flesh by any interposition of the gods, as all men know. Those who were rich, have fared nobly, because they had the means to compass independence; but the laborers in the fields have toiled unnoticed, bearing heavy burdens, enduring grievous suffering, robbed of half their scanty earnings by the insatiable priests, and finally been thrown into the pit and covered from the light.

"And never a sign of relief from the inscrutable, the vigilant, the all-powerful gods!

"Not a sign, to prove that oppression and injustice were abhorrent to them, or even distasteful; not a whisper of sympathy."

The arras was drawn aside at this juncture, and, greatly to the surprise and joy of all, Movis came hurriedly in and threw himself at his father's feet.

Hepsai rose up with an exclamation of pleasure, and lifting his son, embraced him fervently; the sisters ran to him and twined him in their arms; even the leopard sprang upon him in joyous welcome.

He was much fatigued, and his garments were covered with dust, but he showed no signs of having suffered from his brief imprisonment.

"I come but now from our revered mother," he said; "who awaits you within, as soon as I have finished the relation of that which brings me here;—I have but a moment to stay.

"The king, in his magnanimity, has not only released our brothers Balan and Ahmad, and restored them their possessions, but he has also set me free, despite the bloody resistance I offered to his soldiers; and has forgiven Shoza, and taken us both again into favor. It is most wonderful that he should do this thing, because the men of our family have hitherto occupied an offensive position toward the interests which he regards as sacred and personal to himself. Nevertheless, 'tis so."

" 'Tis but a passive opposition, my son," said Hepsai; "and was never prominent by act or word."

"Dear father," Movis replied, "the sensitiveness of the Court is so great as to seem absurd; and its suspicions are roused by the lightest breeze of gossip."

"The king is good, and great,—and we love him," said Dahlymel.

Movis laughed.

"I know a better reason than that, for your loving him," he said;—"but now I must hasten with what I have to say. There is a conspiracy afoot in the city, against the

throne. As yet, the guilty ones are not so certainly known, that measures can be taken to forestall and defeat them; the air is rife with terrors, but they are vague, shadowy, and without form.

"The lords of the temples are also filled with apprehension and fear, not in the least knowing from what quarter the dreaded thunderbolt is to fall. The king has dispatched messengers to the four quarters of the earth, and already the scattered armies are gathering to the walls of the city. From Gedrosia, and Scythia; from the confines of Nyssa, and the borders of the Indaprathea, they come, and from the islands of the Prasodis; from Bactria, and from Palibothra,—legion upon legion.

"And now the celebration of the Feast of Presentation draws near, and I am commanded to see to it that every member of the House of Hepsai is in attendance on the wondrous day. I am come to bring you there, where a pavilion is being prepared for our reception. Carmyhl must come also, for the king commands it; and though we do not know into what quarter of the land our wayward brother has wandered, yet proclamation has been made for him, as for the rest of us."

"Carmyhl will surely be there," said Hepsai, "but he will be separated from us by a barrier."

"A barrier?"

"A chain, whose links shall trip the unwary."

Movis was astonished; and looked inquiringly from his father to his sisters.

"Ask nothing, dear brother," said Phyloprase; "but be assured that the fulfillment of a wonderful prophecy is near at hand. Our Carmyhl is one of many, who are devoted to a task which cannot be mentioned without dread."

"You darken my understanding with mysteries!"

"They will be solved in a little while;—be patient."

"Heard you nothing in the city, Movis," asked Hepsai, "which seemed to touch on a possible uprising?"

"Nothing so definite as that,—and yet something of a nature to disquiet and alarm the timid. Marvelous tales are whispered of a certain Pallahmyhl, whom some have pictured as a monster, while others declare him to be a god. No man appears to have seen this terrible personage face to face, and yet his name has become a familiar sound in the mouths of the people. But I do not apprehend a serious disturbance; the soldiers of the king will fill the city, and guard it well."

"And what of the conspiracy, my son?"

"The rumors of a conspiracy are believed by many to be but fictions of the malcontents, to excite suspicion and to foster a latent fear in certain circumscribed and powerful quarters while schemes of a daring and abominable character are chafing to an overflow in other places. In short, it is believed that the great bulk of this cloudy mass of universal fear has been systematically and thoroughly spread abroad by—but are we alone?"

"We are quite alone;—by whom?"

Movis put his finger to his lips, glancing around the chamber with searching eyes; then coming closer to his father and sisters, he whispered:

"*The White Vultures.*"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE sun shone brilliantly over the vast plain of the River of Hesydrus; and glorified the dark woods and the golden slopes of the mountains, and the flowery fields nestling between them; and lit the trellised groves, and sparkled on the dancing river, and touched with the glamour of its radiance the walls of temples and palaces where the pools of the lotuses and lilies lay, and where the rich rose gardens bloomed and exhaled their fragrance;—and glittered on the grand city of the king, Prophthasia the magnificent, where it lay like a tented snow drift, illimitable in extent, dazzling, and incomparable.

The city awakened with the dawn. Long before the dew had been dispersed from the roofs, the inhabitants sallied forth in their holiday attire, and began to swarm in countless multitudes toward the central parts, where the anticipated display of the power and glory of the king was to be enjoyed more thoroughly and continuously than elsewhere.

It was the day of the Feast of the Presentation.

Upon that day, which was celebrated once in every two years, the tribute of the whole vast kingdom was devoted to gifts of every conceivable and costly nature, which, after being displayed in gorgeous procession before the eyes of the people, were presented to the temples of the gods, and by them absorbed and used until the recurrence of the Feast at the end of the two years following.

Every living soul was interested, and to a greater or less extent gratified and made happy, by the spectacle;

for every living soul had contributed its share to the cost of it, and to the beauty of its rendering.

At noon, the great marble terrace before the gates of the king's palace was glittering with the pomp of the royal occupation.

A throne of ivory and gold in the midst, was canopied from the sun's rays by a lofty structure of jade colored silk; and the king, arrayed in scarlet, and blazing jewels, with a crown of diamonds on his head, sat in state, surrounded by his nine sons, and the lords and notables of the land.

On either side, a company of cataphracts in their glittering mail and formidable armor, sat motionless upon their beautiful horses; while behind the throne, was massed a cohort of stalwart soldiers in crimson habits, with brazen shields and lances.

On the steps of the terrace, were seated the families of the king's house to the number of a thousand persons; amongst whom were children, and maidens distinguished by their beauty and grace of form and feature, all charmingly garbed in white fabrics lavishly adorned with flowers.

In accordance with the king's command, the family of Hepsai were all assembled, and occupied a balcony over the palace gate;—all but Shoza, who stood with his command. Carmyhl was there, but at an early period withdrew, after a whispered conference with his father.

Along the front of the terrace, the principal street of the city passed; a noble avenue, quite three hundred feet in width, and bordering the marble brink of the river, from which it was separated at that point by a wide platform extending from left to right for more than a league.

The platform was like a flower garden, so bright and dense was the mass of people swarming upon it; along

both sides of the avenue, from the terrace steps of the king's court to the blue haze of the indistinguishable distance east and west, the people were crowded together in unbroken and gorgeous lines, rank upon rank, countless as the stars, and scintillating with a perpetual and ever-varying glow of color and movement.

The sound of their voices on the soft breeze which came from the distant mountains, was like the undertone of the sea on a summer's day, or like the fall of many waters heard through intervening woods. All were gay, with an exuberance of careless mirth; they laughed, and called to each other from every motive conceivable, and from no motive whatever, except that they might add their quota to the general jubilation.

And so the morning hours passed; anticipation was high, but the procrastination attending the advent of the pageant did not cause the least uneasiness, or provoke any signs of impatience, amongst the people, myriads of whom had been standing bravely in their hard won places, since the rising of the sun.

The beginning of the festival had been set for the sixth hour; and at the sixth hour, all faces were turned to the west. Cries of joyful anticipation rippled through the lines; the numberless guards who were placed along both sides of the avenue from one end of the city to the other, held their lances horizontally, and made a cordon past which no one was permitted to venture.

At the seventh hour, a tumultuous shout arose; the procession was advancing, and the flash and sparkle of it could be seen from the royal terrace.

The pageant was preceded by a thousand slaves dressed in white, who carried each ten thin-leaved silver bells strung upon long rods of bamboo terminated with immense aigrettes of heron's feathers; and the clashing of

the restless tongues of the bells made a weird and not unmusical sound, which had the effect of stilling the noisy enthusiasm of the multitude.

After the bell bearers, came, like the crest of a prodigious wave of molten silver, six hundred cataphracts fully armed; whose superb horses, caparisoned with flowing silk of a pale sea green color, pranced, and corvetted, and tossed their heads with a lively animation, which showed both themselves and their riders to the best advantage; and in their midst, borne high, fluttered the magnificent standard of the king, and shone the jeweled emblems of his authority.

A multitude of blacks in barbaric vesture, wearing bells upon their ankles, and rings in their ears and upon their arms, came after, bearing on portable platforms treasures of gold and silver, amber, and coral, strung pearls, and all costly jewels; treasures of gemmed silks, and of silver and golden lace; treasures of sea shells from the Prasodis and the isles; treasures of musk, and incense, myrrh, and attar of roses; treasures of ivory, and camphor wood, white linen, and gorgeous palempores; vases and urns of all precious metals; treasures of amethysts and garnets, rock crystals, alabaster, and porphyry; treasures of sandal wood and cedar; of costly furs, bright and rare plumage, oil, wine, and cordials; treasures of all grains; of spices, and honey, and all fruits;—and treasures impossible to enumerate, because of the endless variety of them, and the intermingled and complex character of most of the objects displayed.

After them, came chariots adorned with flowers, in which rode the principal merchants of the city, in sumptuous attire; it was their province to make partition of the gifts at the end of the ceremonies.

Then came, riding on dromedaries, a great concourse

of girls, who led by silken ribbons graceful and elegant gazelles, fawns, and antelopes; and displayed in various forms of splendid captivity all manner of singing birds, and birds of glowing feather; pheasants, and parrots, peacocks, birds of paradise, sun birds, white doves, and pigeons.

Then a thousand porters advanced, drawing upon gilded wheels ingots of copper, and silver, and iron; bales of cloth; ambergris, and wax; selenite; lapis lazuli, and fine marble;—and these were followed by a numerous band of musicians, playing upon reed instruments and instruments strung with resounding chords; which, with the rhythmic clash of cymbals, and the roll of kettle drums, made music of a kind to charm and excite all listeners.

Two thousand horsemen arrayed in crimson silk came after these, and were followed by a vast medley of men and beasts, whose appearance created a new and still more pleasurable excitement amongst the people.

Strange monsters from the deep were there; tortoises, and eagles chained and restive; captive lions walking unurged, with inscrutable faces; wild boars, apes, and chattering monkeys; bears, great and little; fierce tigers, and gliding leopards, straining at their fetters; wild asses, bearded goats, formidable griffins with restless wings, and ponderous zebues, garlanded with flowers.

All these passed, and a great company of minstrels succeeded them, with music and banners; and a double rank of black slaves, cinctured with vermilion, followed at a little distance, bearing from hand to hand an endless chain; —the chain marked the beginning of the most beautiful and impressive feature of the whole splendid pageant.

This was the advance of the sacred oxen.

Eight hundred of these, as white as snow, and without a blemish, came majestically in ranks of sixty abreast,

THE RALLY AROUND THE THRONE. – *Chapter* 18.

their horns shining like amber, and their necks richly festooned with ivy and white roses. They made so beautiful a spectacle as they moved evenly along, scarce needing the guidance of their numerous attendants, that the admiration of the surging throngs was roused to a pitch of boundless enthusiasm, and thousands amongst them, especially the women, were overcome by their emotions and became hysterical.

The oxen were followed by a concourse of musicians robed in azure silk, who played a weird and resounding melody.

They were followed by five hundred elephants in gilded and silken trappings, bearing upon their backs shallow pavilions, filled with sumptuous fabrics.

A thousand slaves, naked to the waist, came afterward, leading with great difficulty, and in exceedingly picturesque disorder, wild horses; which reared and plunged incessantly, foaming at their mouths, and frightened by their wonderful environment.

It was now past the tenth hour; and still the beauties and wonders of the seemingly endless procession grew upon the eyes of the beholders, from the luminous haze of the distance; the eagerness of enjoyment displayed by the myriad throngs ranged along both sides of the grand avenue, suffered no diminishment;—the pageant was at its height.

It was near the eleventh hour; a large body of glittering star-wheeled chariots, festooned with flowers, had rolled past the steps of the royal terrace, and a herd of beautiful cattle shod with silver was moving slowly, curbed and perplexed by ribbons and wreaths of flowers;—when suddenly a change occurred.

An appalling blast as from some preternatural trumpet shook the air, and paralysed all movement; the voices of the multitude were hushed, as by a stroke of magic.

Whence the sound proceeded, was a mystery to all; and for some minutes, the shock occasioned by it was evidenced by a dread suspense, and a universal stare of inquiry and fright.

Then came a repetition of the terrible blast;—and every eye and ear being on the alert, it was known at once to proceed from the gardens of the great temple of Belus, which were situated midway between the king's palace and the court of the bazaars.

The bazaars consisted of a vast aggregation of arcades and pavilions of marble, wherein the traffic was distinguished by the greater wealth and enterprise of the merchants conducting it, and was the pulse and fountain-head of every other industry; and the gardens of the temple being to some extent involved in these opulent precincts, the discovery that the terrifying sound came out from amongst them had a still more dreadful significance attached to it.

But before the trumpet tones had subsided, others arose as if in response to them, and then, from every quarter of the city, they were repeated increasingly; until the general consternation of the people culminated in a panic, the dense masses swayed to and fro, and finally broke loose, overflowing into the forbidden way of the now disordered and halting procession, and streaming wildly in every direction.

The hour and the besom had come.

The king rose up trembling from the throne, and the family of his household, deserting their seats upon the terrace steps, thronged towards him, shrieking and dismayed.

Candase stood by his father's side and supported him, calling to Shoza, who commanded the cataphracts, to clear a way to the shelter of the palace gates.

The brothers of Candase remained seated, and were apparently undisturbed by the din and confusion which whirled all about them. They looked upon their father with a strange apathy, and more than half the assembled lords and courtiers detached themselves from the rest and closed with ominous unanimity around the princes.

Shoza gave a signal, and instantly the trained horses of the cataphracts leaped from their hitherto rigid state of inaction into a formidable and impenetrable ring, completely encircling the king, facing outwards from the throne, and making a defense to it which was further strengthened by the naked swords and axes of their riders. The cohort behind the throne retreated towards the palace gates, forming two lines of soldiers whose leveled spears presented a wide and sufficient barrier against any possible assault.

The way being open and safely guarded, Candase led the king slowly to the great gate of the palace, followed closely by the remnant of the lords and potentates who were still faithful, and by the women and children of the palace, their slaves and attendants.

The mounted cataphracts backed their horses in a close semicircle, following the retreat, and in a brief space of time the king and his followers were safely past the high wall, and the gates were closed upon them.

Shoza called to his men and instantly advanced again to where the empty throne stood like a blinding sun in the eyes of the recalcitrant and perfidious princes and their confederates.

Still, the latter did not move from their positions, but maintained them with such a singular exhibition of coolness that it was plain they had expected the violent interruption of the ceremonies of the day, and were not only

prepared for it, but were waiting for the advent of some more particular sign.

Meanwhile, the vast procession had evidently met with some serious obstacle to its advance, for it was turned back upon itself, and came rolling like a foaming torrent, spreading destruction and death on all sides. The wild horses were broken loose from their leaders, and plunged madly hither and thither, trampling down the screaming multitudes by the thousand, and more than half of them leaping blindly into the river.

The white oxen, whose matchless beauty and grand appearance had drawn the most joyous and enthusiastic plaudits from the people, stopped in their measured tread, sniffed the air, trembled, and dashed headlong to every quarter. They were irresistible; and the tremendous force of their onset was marked by the fall of myriads of gay pavilions, the destruction of booths, the crash of falling colonnades, and the slaughter of the terrified and helpless citizens.

The elephants stood at bay and trumpeted loudly in their fright; and the wild beasts which had been led along by guiding chains, were free, but fortunately were frantic also, with a fear which drove them crouching into every hollow of the ground.

The primal cause of the uproar was soon apparent.

At the first blast of the trumpet, nearly every third man comprising the multitudinous concourse gathered in the vicinity of the temple of Belus, and along the lines of the avenue through which the procession was advancing, took from the concealment of his breast a yellow scarf, and quickly twisted it about his head, at the same time bringing to light a sword, or dagger, or other offensive weapon; at the second sounding of the trumpet, and continuously thereafter, these men, who numbered hundreds

of thousands, made a concerted movement as directly as possible to the nearest temple of the gods.

Then appeared their leaders, men mounted upon fiery horses, and wearing tunics of gold colored cloth; they were the chiefs of the dreaded sect of the Imaus.

The Imaus had come at last.

They carried battle axes, and shields, and their aspect was fierce and indomitable; on the mission to which they were bent, they were sworn to be merciless.

By this time the priests, who had been holding a species of carnival in the various temples, and in the gardens adjacent to them, anticipative of the hour for receiving their apportionment of the sacred offerings, were fully aroused and shaken out of their supreme complacency by the sudden visitation. The unearthly blare of the trumpets made them pause in the midst of their ornate functions; the crash and thunder of the stampeded beasts made them blanch with fear; the shrieks and cries of the people drove them to frenzied action; and almost before they knew it, they were striving mightily with the adversaries who threatened to overwhelm them.

The frightful noises which tore the golden atmosphere into shreds were further augmented by the piercing clangor of bells, and the hoarse rumble of innumerable gongs; from every quarter of the city great clouds of smoke were rising high up to the blue sky, and the crackle and hiss of leaping flames vied with the shouts of desperate and bewildered fugitives.

In the midst of the thrilling turmoil, a horseman clothed in white silk, wearing a golden helmet with the visor down, and armed with a golden shield, and a sword which glanced like a flame of fire, came riding through the conflict.

He advanced like a whirlwind along the outer edge of

the avenue, where the way was comparatively clear; and leaped, or overthrew, every obstacle in his path, until he came to the steps of the grand temple of Belus.

There, he drew rein suddenly, where a dense concourse of the yellow-scarfed Imaus were striving in their fiercely disputed ascent of the marble steps; and on the instant, a great shout went up, as the leader of the sect was recognised, and his potency acknowledged.

"Pallahmyhl! Pallahmyhl!" they cried.

They swarmed about him, clamorous for his commands.

"Into the cavern!" he said, with an imperious gesture; "the lair of the Beast is here, and must be swept with fire. Take no account of order, but every man remember the wanton stings of the serpent, the tears of anguish caused by the cruel monster-god, and the blood that drips from his fanged and pitiless maw. Remember these, and strive for victory to the last breath.—Come!"

He sprang from his horse, and led the way step by step to the grand pronaos of the temple.

Reaching the platform above, an impetuous assault was made, and the interior of the temple gained despite the frantic opposition of its armed custodians.

The interior of the temple of Belus was magnificent beyond description.

Five hundred immense pillars of gleaming white marble rose up from pedestals of red porphyry, and supported arches and cornices of alabaster, wrought into elaborate and beautiful designs.

The roof comprised a glowing network of jewels of rock crystal, set in carved beams of every precious wood known to the cunning artificer.

The walls, though only hazily perceptible, on account of the general gloom of the interior and the lingering pall

of the smoke of incense, were richly carved, and inlaid with plates of silver and gold.

There were twenty high altars ranged on either side, upon each of which an idol of sandalwood was seated, draped with costly and brilliantly hued silken fabrics, lavishly adorned with jewels.

On passing through the wide pronaos, the first object to attract, and hold the eyes in blank amazement, was the wonderful and far-famed image of the great god of the people.

It represented a monstrous form, whose upper shape was that of a man with the face of an eagle; and whose lower parts were composed of a dragon with curling scales, a prodigious shining serpent, and the fantastic semblance of a land tortoise; all huge in proportion, and involved together in the most perplexing and mystifying manner. In the talon-like hands of its six arms, it held the symbols of the four elements, and those of the two mysteries, life, and death.

The image was fifty feet in height, and was covered from the claws of the tortoise, to the strange horns on the head of the bird, with plates of beaten gold.

Its pedestal was a marvel of the sculptor's art, wrought in fine marble, and profusely inlaid with all manner of precious stones; it was twenty feet high; from the shining pavement, to the glooms of the smoke of incense above, the image of Belus loomed seventy feet.

Pallahmyhl advanced to the great altar, which stood before the idol, draped in flowers; the pavement was already cumbered with the bodies of the fallen, and was slippery with the blood which flowed from the furious struggle going on all about.

The Imaus were raging unmercifully on every side, and at every stroke they made, a priest went down; breast to

breast, their very breath mingling, and their eyes glaring in each other's faces with a speechless hatred, priests and Imaus together strove with a determination which knew no faltering.

After a while, the altar was gained, Pallahmyhl leading; his white robe was streaked and spotted with crimson.

"At last!" he cried, holding his bloody sword aloft in the face of the deity;—"thou Beast, insatiate! Where is thy vaunted power? Canst thou answer me from the bird lips, as Alpleh answered once from the lips of a man? Canst thou bring the lightning from the sky to blast thy mortal enemies?—or draw up the river from its bed to drown them and purge the city of iniquity? We defy thee! The measure of woe thou hast dealt to us in the past we measure again to thee, to overflowing!"

He passed from before the altar, calling to his followers; and ran up the shallow steps which marked the elevation of the main floor of the temple at the feet of Belus.

Gaining the top, he was confronted with a mixed horde of priests and temple soldiers, heavily armed, but wrought to such a pitch of recklessness and fear that it led them blindly to their own destruction.

The Imaus were close on Pallahmyhl, and another and fiercer conflict was precipitated. At the fall of every priest, it seemed as though a dozen more replaced him, so numerous were they, all coming from the secret recesses beyond the sacred pale.

The Imaus were not untouched. Hundreds of them gave up their lives there; and gray robes and white ones, prone upon the ghastly pavement, were mingled thickly with yellow scarfs, and sodden, all of them, where they lay.

The contending forces were borne backward and forward, as advantage favored either side; and the clash of

steel was mingled now, since the soldiers came, with shouts and curses, and with the hideous plunge of the slain.

The horror was unmitigated.

But the Imaus were continually streaming in through the wide pronaos, and their numbers multiplied so rapidly that the temple seemed to rock with a convulsion.

Suddenly, there was a tremendous crash, and the assailants poured victoriously over the writhing bodies of their foes, reached the battered gates of the sanctuary, and invaded with shouts of triumph the mystical regions of the inner temple.

The Imaus had conquered; Pallahmyhl was victorious.

In the meanwhile, the besom swept another, and a greater place.

On the terrace before the palace gates, the princes were still assembled with their following, and the glittering barrier of the cataphracts still guarded the empty throne.

A wild sea of human figures indiscriminately mingled with horses and chariots, raged around upon all sides, and made escape impossible to those who sought relief from the awful tempest.

A legion of soldiers guarded the front and sides of the terrace against the frantic multitude, those on foot being massed like a wall upon the lower steps, and the horsemen standing close together in front, presenting a line of flashing spear points from one end to the other.

While the golden stream of the Imaus was surging up the steps of the temple of Belus, and divergent branches of the stream assailed the numberless other houses of the gods, shouting, and hewing their way to death or victory, another and quite different body of men in scarlet jerkins appeared from the river side, where they had landed from a flotilla of boats. They formed themselves in a compact

square, and advanced thus to the terrace, pushing their way with an irresistible force through the scattering throng.

As they came nearer, it was seen that every man was armed with a two-edged sword, and wore upon his breast a device in silver fillagree representing a vulture with outspread wings; from the shoulders of each depended a curiously draped tunic of purple silk, edged and corded with silver; they were helmeted also, with caps of silver.

They were led by a giant whose magnificent form towered conspicuously above the rest; he was clothed in scarlet silk, like a king, and bore himself with majesty.

Upon his breast appeared a round sun of blazing diamonds; his head was covered with a golden helmet, upon the crest of which was the semblance of a white vulture with drooping wings; the wings, and the closed visor together, hid the face of the wearer, but every one not wholly mad with terror knew the figure to be that of Plahdron, the lord and ruler of the White Vultures.

The soldiers and cavalry were instantly on the alert, and by crushing themselves sidewise opened a lane to the top of the terrace for the new comers.

The princes flung off their apparent apathy at the same time, and leaving their seats in haste, advanced with their attendants to meet the robber chief.

"Long live the king!" they cried; "Ahlmarath is dead, and Myrhitra his brother, reigns! Ascend! Ascend! Great king, be thou our lord, and the lord of all the people, evermore!"

Plahdron lifted his visor, disclosing a face whose whiteness was appalling at the first glance, and whose eyes burned like coals of fire. The hair upon his head was like a drift of snow, and the disarrangement of his upper robe revealed a white beard, carefully and elaborately braided.

He addressed the eight princes together, glancing comprehensively upon them.

" 'Tis forty years since the light of day has freely touched my face," he said;—"I, the eldest son of your grandfather, banished and disinherited because of a trivial childish folly in my youth, have suffered the contumely of the people, and been made to hide in secret like a wounded serpent in a hollow of the mountains. My brother, who has wronged me, shall make reparation; for he knew that I was vilely slandered, and ignominiously proscribed.

"The hour is my own at last! The Imaus, who are taking vengeance on the accursed dragons of the temples, are our friends, and will support our claims. As for you, my faithful nephews, each shall have his own dominion on the skirts of my recovered empire; and shall rule with power and riches commensurate with your dignity.

"Behold, the throne of our Prophthasia invites!

"Let us take it,—and the crown also."

He advanced proudly to the glittering dais, where the cataphracts were drawn up in imperturbable force, guarding the jeweled seat of power.

The cataphracts made no sign of allegiance, however, men and horses standing like a golden wall before and beside the dais.

Plahdron-Myrhitra seemed disconcerted; but it was only for a moment.

"What!" he cried in a terrible voice, "do you stand like images of brass before your king?"

"The king is withdrawn;" answered Shoza, boldly; "within the hour, he will return."

Plahdron-Myrhitra turned to his followers on the instant, and commanded them to advance; the princes called upon the legion of soldiers ranked upon the steps of the

terrace to turn their spears on the enemies of the new king and dislodge them.

With a thunderous shout, the soldiers responded, rushing up in a body, while the cavalry urged their horses to the ascent, and were soon engaged in battle with the royal guard.

But Shoza and his men proved to be foes of a more than ordinary character; agile and resistless in their movements, keen in their perception of advantages, and remorseless in the use of their dreaded and unerring weapons, they anticipated every movement of the assailants.

The contest was bitter and prolonged. The princes and their following took an active part, using their weapons for the first time; and the tall form of the returned claimant of the throne led them, his golden helmet shining like a dancing star above the rest, and his formidable sword visiting death at every tremendous stroke.

The cataphracts began to yield.

The desperation into which they were thrown by the constant accessions to the ranks of their adversaries caused them to achieve prodigies of valor; and although they were driven slowly back, step by step, their horses foaming and splintering the bright pavement with their crashing hoofs, they never faltered, or wavered; they were the king's reliance.

The critical stage of battle was come;—when, like a blinding mist driven before a gale, a vast army with banners and spears waving and glancing came into view from the west, and when they were near enough to be distinguished with certainty, the princes cried out to their uncle that the approaching forces belonged to them, and would quickly decide the conflict in their favor.

In that supreme moment also, the great gate of the

palace was rolled aside, and king Ahlmarath appeared, leaning upon the shoulder of his son, Candase; who, followed by a multitude of eager soldiers in the livery of the palace, advanced a little way, and paused some distance from the dais until a clearing should be made.

Candase stood alone by his father, but the soldiers following him joined themselves at once to the wavering cohort which had been standing all this time phlegmatically before the gate, and all together, they fell upon the advance of the prince's army, compelling them to halt.

At the same time, Shoza, driven to his last resort, placed a silver call to his lips and blew upon it, producing a most extraordinary sound, like the shriek of a wild beast in mortal agony. He blew repeatedly, and continuing the fight with unabated vigor was soon rewarded by seeing a host of the king's cataphracts,—those who had hitherto been guarding the various approaches to the royal palace, —come bounding through the rifts of yelling people, striking right and left as they reached the hireling soldiers, and so for the moment saving their comrades from defeat.

They comprised, with Shoza's men, the whole of the king's personal and trusted guard.

Meanwhile, another army was approaching from the east, and almost as soon as they were perceived they threw themselves into the conflict with so much impetuosity that for a while neither side could call them either enemies or friends.

They created a greater panic than had yet prevailed; they seemed possessed with a kind of frenzy.

Candase urged his father towards the dais and there, by strenuous efforts, seated him upon the throne, and called on Shoza to stand fast where he was, and live or

die there. Shoza responded at once, and surrounded the king with a barrier of steel.

Candase was armed with a long and slender sword, which seemed a veritable toy in contrast to the broad and heavy blades of the soldiers; but with this seemingly insufficient weapon, he forced his way to the bloody presence of the giant, and defied him.

Plahdron-Myrhitra looked down upon him scornfully; his heretofore ghastly pallid face was flushed to crimson, and his silken robes were torn to scarlet shreds. The wings of his helmet seemed living wings, and shadowed darkly the eyes beneath them; the diamonds on his breast were blinding to an adversary—but his visor was open.

The assault of the prince was quick, sharp, and brief.

Before the astonished Vultures writhing around their master could guess what was impending, Candase sprang with lightning-like rapidity upon him, avoiding the terrific sweep of his sword by a hair's breadth; there was a flash of light, like the glancing of a silver dart; a cry, a spurt of blood,—and the once formidable and mysterious leader of the dreaded White Vultures fell, mortally wounded.

At the same time, the host of soldiers from the east,—they who had brought additional confusion to the desperate conflict,—proved themselves to be troops still faithful to king Ahlmarath, and as such, were steadily gaining advantage over the princes' legions.

The sky was darkened. The smoke from the burning temples was beginning to spread like a pall over the city, and leaping flames could be seen in every direction.

The coming together of the armies from the west and from the east, had had the effect of clearing all the streets and open places of the hysterical and madly helpless citizens, and the huge remnants of the whilom holiday makers had found their ways and fled precipitately to their homes.

The ground was red with blood, and the bodies of the slain cumbered the places lately given up to mirth.

The River of Hesydrus ran purple; and bore upon its ripples, ghastly burdens, scarce intelligible to the eyes, but frightfully suggestive.

The gayly bannered ships were deserted, and the numberless gilded barges, the shallops devoted to pleasure, were floating idly hither and thither, unguided, and confused.

Now and then a rumbling sound told where the marble image of some sculptored god had been overturned; or marked the falling of domes, and minarets, and the countless shrines and altars, as they were toppled with their idols to the resounding stones under the raging flames that licked them, and crumbled them piecemeal.

Coincidental with the fall of Plahdron-Myrhitra, came a heavy shock of thunder from the great temple of Belus; the crash and ring of metal which accompanied it were eloquent of a greater fall than that of the White Vulture.

All eyes were turned involuntarily toward the blazing furnace beyond the shriveled gardens; and saw the grand pronaos with its sculptored pillars bulge outward, vomiting flames of fire, and sink to the crushed and broken steps below in ruins; they saw black clouds of smoke shoot forth as if blown by a tempest;—and on the instant, the proud temple of the god, the cavern of the Beast, was laid open to the sulphurous air as by the rending of an earthquake.

Belus had been thrown from his pedestal; falling with tremendous force against the temple walls, the image had riven them, and emerged from beyond the pronaos.

It was like the plunge of a golden thunderbolt; it seemed a vagary of the lightning.

The god of the Egyptians was dethroned, indeed.

The fall was great and terrible; it marked the doom of the old idolatry,—but it also heralded the approach of another one which was destined to be a thousand fold more degrading and abject.

Nevertheless, there was a hiatus in the reign of iniquity.

"BELUS IS FALLEN!" cried prince Candase, startled and unnerved despite the elasticity of his devotion.

"BELUS IS FALLEN!" shouted the cataphracts, drawing their quivering steeds down upon their haunches.

"BELUS IS FALLEN!" was echoed through the ranks of the soldiers; and the contending armies drew apart and stared, inactive.

Suddenly, Candase gave a shuddering cry, a cry that thrilled to the heart of Shoza, who was near him:

The king upon his throne was dead!

They lifted him up and placed him on a silken couch by a pillar of the canopy; and Candase threw himself upon his knees, and with his hands upon his father's breast besought him to speak.

Life had flown, however; with the fall of Belus, and the revealed infamy of his rebellious sons, the overstrained heart of the king was broken.

Candase was in an ecstasy of grief, and for a long while would not respond to the efforts of his attendants to restore his calm; he called repeatedly to his father with endearing names, not realising that he was dead.

While he grieved and wept, the conflict was resumed on all sides, and the mad warfare was further complicated by the swift approach of myriads upon myriads of men in the gold colored dress of the Imaus; who, flushed with victory, now showed themselves with bolder fronts, wielding bloody swords and battle axes indiscriminately, as they forced their way to the steps of the terrace.

Arriving there, they shouted with loud conclamation

their allegiance to the king, and, not knowing that the king was dead, fell with a concentrated fury upon the soldiers of the recreant princes, driving them back like withered leaves.

The princes were amazed and stupefied; they perceived too late, that the Imaus were their enemies.

They lost control of their reason, and, hesitating, were slain where they wavered.

The sun was going down in a fast darkening haze of crimson, and the shadow of night, made more appalling by the lurid clouds of smoke which hung suspended over the great city, crept on unheeded by the actors in the bloody tragedy.

The Feast of the Presentation had proved a grimmer mockery than that other feast, the Feast of Homage; and had become instead, a ghastly festival of retribution.

The fall of the princes and the crushing defeat of their cohorts, brought a surcease of hostilities in the vicinity of the royal terrace, but doubt and indecision prolonged them farther away.

Then came Pallahmyhl like a sheeted spectre on his glittering horse, shouting to the Imaus to withhold their swords and draw away from the hideous carnage.

In a moment,—at the first sound of his voice,—the tumult ceased; the contending forces retired without another blow, and massed themselves in formless groups, leaderless, perplexed, and awed by the shining figure of the terrible prophet whose advent was like a stroke of magic, changing the face of fortune.

Pallahmyhl drew rein at the foot of the terrace, and, dismounting, hastened up the reeking steps, and approached the throne.

He stopped suddenly, on coming to the silken couch

whereon the dead king lay in the despairing embrace of his son.

"What is this?" he asked, in an agitated voice.

Shoza answered him without turning his head, or making a movement from the statue-like position which he, and all his men, maintained.

"The king is dead," he said; "and the king's brother, who proved to be the mystical Plahdron of the White Vultures, is also dead, lying yonder on the steps of the terrace. The false and unnatural princes are slain, and their bodies cumber the outer court. The constant and loving son who survives, is he upon whose heart the shadow falls the heaviest."

"Candase?" said the Imaus; "He lives?"

"He lives;" answered Shoza, briefly.

"All is well, then;" said Pallahmyhl, with a gesture of relief.

He placed his mailed hand on the prince's shoulder; who lifted his eyes to the visored disturber of his grief, then arose, and confronted him.

"Thou dreaded and inscrutable one," he said, "—prophet, god, avenger,—tell me if my brother lives?—my brother Carmyhl."

"Carmyhl lives," answered the Imaus; "and shares in the victory we have achieved over the monster-god.—But come! Faithful to the end, you shall be our king, and shall lift to higher pinnacles the glory of your father.—Come!"

He stooped and took the crown from the head of Ahlmarath, and placed it on that of Candase; and led him, as one leads a dreamer, to the royal dais, and seated him upon the throne; and placed the sceptre in his hand.

A great and thunderous cry arose on all sides, and

the cataphracts struck their shields together as they shouted—

"All hail to Candase, king of Prophthasia!"

And so the besom passed.

CHAPTER XIX

THE day of retribution was followed by a year of mourning.

A whole month was occupied in the cleansing of the city from the effects of the awful strife, for the slaughter had been prodigious.

The scenes of woe transpiring afterward when the weeping and frenzied survivors sought their dead, sometimes in vain, and sometimes only to find them mangled almost beyond recognition, were pitiful, indeed, and the despairing cries of the bereaved were heartrending.

But few of the countless shrines of the gods which lately added so much architectural beauty to the great squares and open places of the city, and fringed the marble brink of the river winding through it, were left in their entirety; and none of the temples escaped a more or less tremendous wrecking, not only within their courts, but without, upon their rich adornments, the rare sculpture of their walls and terraces, and the exquisite gardens which bloomed so gloriously around them.

The work of destruction had been carried on unremittingly night and day, until the passion of the multitude had been measurably appeased by the swift reality and thoroughness of their vengeance.

The temple of Belus was wholly and utterly destroyed, not a pillar being left upright, nor a wall left unbroken.

Within the penetralia of that wonderful structure, the things of infamy revealed passed all understanding; and many abominations were discovered there, which were al-

most too gross for belief, and were in every case vile and unspeakable.

The rage of the destroyers waxed greater with every blow of their shattering instruments, and when the work of other agencies failed, the efficient help of fire was brought to level down the proud fabric.

The priceless stores of silk and other splendid stuffs, the gorgeous banners, the sumptuous vestments of the priests, and all the nameless and perplexing paraphernalia of the temple, were seized and shared piecemeal by those into whose hands they fell.

The vases, statues, and ornaments, of silver, gold, and crystal, the countless jewels, the chests of treasure of money, the furnishings of secret chambers, and even the provision of food and wine, were taken, and shared by all.

The golden image of Belus was broken up, and taken to the treasure-house of the king.

Then followed a year of mourning; of the burying of the dead; of the rehabilitation of ruined bazaars, and shattered homes; of dismal processions wandering through the streets, wailing, seeking comfort and finding none.

The gods were destroyed, and their altars obliterated; the frenzy of the Imaus had become infectious and universal, seizing upon the hearts of the people with the grip of an inspiration to liberty; and, following its impulse, they had crushed the serpent whose fangs had tortured them.

The gods were destroyed; false gods, all of them.

But ah, was there no veritable god in all the world, to whom they could bring their griefs for assuagement?

For the horrible deity under whose heel they had writhed so long, was not, after all, a god of power.

He had come, ages ago, from the unknown land where the sun went down; from the terrible region beyond the

deserts and the seas; beyond the mountains of the kingdoms of their lord, the greatest king of all.

He had come from the land of wonders, of which they knew no more than of the stars in the sky; from a dream city there, in the midst of a fabled kingdom walled with pyramids and hanging gardens; from Assi;—from the land of Egypt.

A strange and cruel god,—and they had bowed to him.

A god not efficient beyond his own first altar,—and they had worshipped him!

Belus! The god of the Egyptians;—a god with whom their interests were as the flowers of the lotus, to be adorned withal; to be enjoyed, and then thrown away.

And their fathers had received him, and welcomed him, and housed him sumptuously in their temples.

They had bestowed upon him gifts, they had overwhelmed him with riches; they had worshipped him, and had lived and died believing that he was gracious and would reward their obedience and devotion with loving kindness.

But being a strange god, and unsympathetic,—a god of another and diverse people,—he cared for nothing but the glory of his own estate. Every day and every hour he sucked the substance of the people, taking all, and giving nothing in return except the empty splendors of his celebrations, and the hollow promises of his lying oracles.

In base debauchery, his priests were hedged in their unreachable places. He drank the blood of virgins at the times of his appointing, when the greater sacrifices were made; and the abominations of his secret orgies were conducted with the pomp and ceremony of kings, with the revelry of beasts, with the feasting of gluttons.

And the people starved, paying the price for all; and

were whipped, and put in chains, and even slain, in grim requital of their meek complacency.

Oh, blessed Pallahmyhl, to open the eyes of the wretched ones to the infamy of this god!

Wise Pallahmyhl; who saw the rift in the cloud that smothered them, and scattered the darkness with his sword!

And where was Pallahmyhl now, after the storm had passed? What had become of their deliverer?

For after he had crowned the new king, he had gone from the eyes of men, and none knew where to find him.

Alas, and alas!—the storm which had climaxed the stress of their cruel malady had left them helpless indeed.

. . . . . .

A barge, manned by twenty oarsmen, came swiftly up the river, on a lovely morning a year after the fall of Belus.

Under the broad canopy in the stern, Movis and Phyloprase were seated, eagerly scanning the sedgy shores, as they passed, first one, and then another, of the ruined and dishonored shrines of the gods, where the marks of violence were plainly visible; they were coming to view the condition of their former beautiful home, preparatory to its full and perfect restoration.

As they passed the broken terrace of the temple of Alpleh, they perceived that the destruction there had been more comprehensive and complete than elsewhere; only one vast pillar was left standing to mark the site of the former beautiful pile, and a shapeless hummock of brass lying at its base was the sole reminder of the power which had dominated all that region; it was the crushed and battered effigy of the fallen god.

The boat was guided to the mossy platform at the foot of the garden meadow of the House of Hepsai; and the

brother and sister stepped out upon it for the first time since its cruel invasion.

Desiring the rowers to wait there for their return, Movis opened the half ruined trellis gate, and he and Phyloprase went up to the place where their former home had stood.

Nothing remained there, excepting the heaps of stones and rubbish, and the scorched spectre of the great deodar which had stood in the middle court.

And yet there was something, too, which attracted their attention and revived bitter memories of another kind. It was the altar of the once loved Isyl, overgrown with tall and nodding weeds; at the foot of it lay the tarnished figure of the whilom bright deity, and there, in the rank grass a little way removed, was the dissevered head with its face upturned to the sun.

They made the circuit of the ruins slowly, and with but little converse; the spot they were revisiting teemed with memories; it was sacred.

Afterward, as Phyloprase sat upon a stone of the porch, while Movis was at the opposite side of the court, she perceived a figure coming towards them from an adjacent copse. Startled, she arose, looked steadfastly upon it for a moment, then hastened to meet it. It was Carmyhl.

"Oh, brother;" she cried, "what wicked chance has kept you from us so long?"

Carmyhl embraced her fervently. He was pale, and weary looking, and his eyes were hollow and sad. He was clad in the vestment of a prince of the Imaus, and the beauty of his appearance was in startling contrast with the splintered stones and rank weeds everywhere visible.

"Do not call it wicked, dear sister," he said; "because

it was the fated opportunity of one supremely honored."

Movis then came, and embraced him in turn.

"Shall I ever forget the day," he said, "when I asked you to find the White Vulture? A miserable and thoughtless speech indeed, that spoiled a happy holiday."

"Say rather a blessed day, unspoiled," replied Carmyhl; "and a happy speech, whose meaning was so deep that none of us could fathom it. A speech, not of your own thought, my brother, but one which was inspired by some previsionary power, to compass the beginning of a wonderful and certain revelation.

"But tell me of our other brothers and sisters, our father and mother, and also of Candase, who is now our king. Is it not incredible, that Candase should be king?"

"Not so incredible as that our little Dahlymel should be queen," answered Phyloprase.

"Dahlymel,—queen?—The mourning for the dead king was brief, then. And yet, I am wholly pleased; our gentle sister was incapable of sustaining so many vicissitudes without the support of a loving and efficient arm; my brother Candase has done wisely. And Shoza?—and the rest?"

"Shoza is made general of all the new king's armies," said Movis. "His first act was to censure, and then forgive, that portion of the troops which had been betrayed into a half-hearted allegiance to the rebellious princes; and now Shoza rules them all, from the least to the greatest, like one accustomed to arbitrary power.

"Balan, and Ahmad, are on the way to a new prosperity; and I, Movis, am commanded by the king to restore the house of our fathers to its former state, and our father and mother have elected to return hither when the work is finished, to spend the remainder of their lives.

"Shalzamene is betrothed to the lord governor of Ged-

rosia, and our proud Phyloprase will marry the king of Bactria."

"You amaze me! Dear sister, is Movis in earnest?"

"Yes;" she answered, blushing.

"The example set by the vestal," continued Movis, "proved to be so alluring, that, whether or no, the others have quickly succumbed to it. Both the king of Bactria, and the governor of Gedrosia, are lords of exceptional worth in their own persons, and their estates are vast and magnificent."

"I have been far away, since the uprising," said Carmyhl; "and what you tell me, is news indeed. I am more than glad to hear these tidings, and would be happy, were it not for the gravity of my own affair.—And what of Pallahmyhl?"

"Pallahmyhl, the inscrutable and mysterious! Dear brother, no man can answer that question. On the very night following the never-to-be-forgotten day of blood, a year ago, he was seen to mount his horse in the king's gate, and to ride away through the darkness; some say in one direction, some another. He vanished; and though the whole kingdom cry out for him, he has never returned, or made a sign by which his state or whereabouts could be known."

"Upon that day," said Carmyhl, "I fought with Pallahmyhl, and was with him at the sacking of the great temple. But now, the work of the Imaus is finished, and the adherents to the secret compact are scattered, and free, released from all obligations.

"They were not hirelings, as some have supposed, but were joined together voluntarily in a mutual despair, and with a desire for vengeance on their oppressors; and every man of them was a faithful subject of the king.

"It was necessity, only, which prompted the selection

of the day of the Presentation for the beginning of the struggle; for on that day, the soldiers whose province it especially was to throng around, and protect the temples of the gods, were dispersed to meet the exigencies of the holiday.

"Thousands of them were marching in the procession itself; thousands of them were acting as escorts to the potent visitors from afar; and thousands of them were at the gates, to add the splendor of their uniforms to the general glow of color and brilliancy befitting so august an occasion."

"But, Carmyhl," said Phyloprase, "why have you kept from us so long? The king was bitterly disappointed when they told him you had left us; he declared that since the mission you had involved yourself in, had been fulfilled,—"

"Dear sister," interrupted Carmyhl, "what, I pray you, was my mission?"

Phyloprase looked down, not answering.

"Father told me something of it," said Movis; "and though I did not fully understand, yet I gathered that it related to some scheme for bringing the gods to reason,—after they had first been disciplined into a receptive state of mind; punished, in fact, for their former remissness; humbled; debased."

"More than that, Movis,—that was but a part of the duty which the unknown spirit imposed upon me. The gods were dross; how, then, could they have the attribute of reason, to be appealed to?

"But the false deities before whose altars we have knelt in ignorance, will cheat us no more;—the gods are destroyed. They were gods of another people, of another land, of an unknown and far remote region.

"I wait for the fulfillment of the promise of the prophet

who foretold these things, ages ago; the fulfillment of the greater promise; the final triumph which is even now impending, for the way has been swept of its incumbrances. This is my mission:—to receive knowledge."

"Dear Carmyhl, are you not wise enough already? One who has listened to the preaching of that phantom, Pallahmyhl, as you have doubtless done, must be wise indeed. Yet, tell us the nature of the special wisdom which you seek so assiduously."

"If you had listened attentively to our father's words, Movis, you would have known; but I will tell you again:

"My quest is for the veritable god, who lives, who is omniscient, and is the god above all other gods.

"Whose name I know not, as yet, nor whose dwelling place, nor the signs of whose presence. Such a god, there is, there must be, for the soul of every man declares it.

"Not a god of wood, or of stone, fashioned by the hands of men; not a fabled dragon whose power is exercised wholly in the dark, and is neither potent for the redress of wrongs, nor for the punishment of iniquities.

"Not an amiable monstrosity of the imagination, whose whereabouts have never been determined, and whose alleged beneficence is wholly compassed in the grin of a golden image, or the vacant stare of an idol carved in marble;—none of these.

"But rather, one who is greater than men. One whose attributes may be recognised in the heart, and in the mind; who is neither made of stone, or of brass, or of ivory; whose wisdom is unimpeachable, and whose kindliness can be felt, indeed.

"One whose influence is sufficient to draw us to him, where he is, and to keep us in safety from all doubts; and one from whom shall come the supreme assurance of a

perfect protection,—of a perfect contentment, now, and in the after time."

"Such a god as this," said Movis, "will be hard to find; for what manner of man can he be, whose qualities and attainments are of such superlative lustre? Will you search amongst the Gymnosophists for such a paragon?"

"Dear brother,—shall we worship a man?—and yet I have heard it said by the wise, that the day will come, long hence,—even so far away as a thousand years hence, —when men will worship the withered bones of other men, and make obeisance to them, and regard them as holy, even as we have regarded our idols as holy."

"If that is a true prophecy," said Phyloprase, "your quest for a perfect god will be a fruitless one;— a perfect god would be one who would insure to his people an ever-growing and true enlightenment; and if he were found, the foolish thing you speak of would be impossible. To worship a bone!—'tis incredible."

"Not only will they worship the bones of men, a thousand years hence, dear sister, but the wise men say that they will make to themselves images of the men and women they have known, and will worship them also, in all sincerity."

"It is incredible!" repeated Phyloprase, earnestly. "But if men are indeed fated to degenerate so grossly, why should any care be taken, now, or ever, to guide them either in one way, or in another? If after the lapse of centuries to come, the race is predestined to a lower degradation than has yet befallen it, why should one strive for their elevation to a height, from whence the fall will be more pitiful than as though they slept in ignorance? A bone?—why, brother, I would rather worship a butterfly; for that, at least, contains a living mystery."

"But have we not had more than enough of paying our

devotions to the wretched and inadequate creations of our foolish fancies? We shall worship neither bones, nor men, nor butterflies, sister,—nor anything which is born as we are born, and dies as all must die. We will have no mutable and ephemeral god, but one who is immutable and everlasting. In my dreams, I have conceived of such a deity;—one who shall be to us as a father, even as our own father was like a god to us when we were children."

"But, Carmyhl, though your conception of a god be very beautiful, and though such qualities as you describe are most desirable, I fear that the hope which animates you is a visionary one, and one not wisely to be indulged. For such a deity, in order to be palpable to our understanding, must needs be one whose attributes are capable of being shown in imagery;—and that would only be adding one more to the myriad gods we know already. If not capable of presentment in some form of visible eloquence, then we might, with better reason, worship the invisible air, and put our faith in dreams."

"Ah, Phyloprase, have you never yearned in secret for the blessing of spiritual knowledge?"

"Often, dear brother, but that can only come with age. Youth is the time for worldly things; for faith in everything; for boundless hope, and for endless pleasure. With age, knowledge will come; and then the strange, yet now inconsequent vacancy in our hearts, will be filled with the treasure of spiritual and holy things. So we have been taught from childhood; the gods have fostered our content, and the priests at the altars have confirmed it."

"But Phyloprase, consider:—if we put aside the higher aspirations of our souls when we are young, they lose their potency when age has wearied us and the hollowness of a life of pleasure has discouraged us. In youth, we feel the quickening touch of noble sentiments more

clearly; but if we put these gracious influences aside, stifling their voices with the flimsy curtain of a gay procrastination, the time will come when our neglect of them shall sting us cruelly, and leave us helpless indeed.

"Oh, sister,—and you, brother,—give always an attentive ear when the spirit within you speaks, though its voice be but a whisper, and its speech wordless. Listen, and rise up, and so you shall fulfill the august destiny to which all souls should eagerly aspire before the years have dulled them irretrievably.

"I would not have you abandon pleasure, for if pleasure be rationally indulged, it adds a lustre to the sunshine of a mere existence, and gives a perfume to an otherwise simply beautiful but scentless flower.

"The priests have taught us falsely, in teaching that we should wait until we are old before we try to grasp the things unseen; for if we wait, what shall we find ourselves to be, when time has flown away with all our buoyancy and freshness, all our sparkle and crisp vitality? Why, merely children again;—but children blemished.

"However, we have slain the imbeciles in spiritual things, and done away with them; venal priests, and incontinent gods,—they were accursed from the beginning, and are now swept away. Oh, what a day that shall be, when your brother finds the very god, and brings you tidings of his glory!

"But wait. Ah, be patient yet another while, and wait for me. I will bring you tidings of a light which shall light the whole world; I will yet find that god whom my soul is bent on worshipping."

Carmyhl uttered these words with so much fervency, that both Movis and Phyloprase were sensibly moved, and in a measure perturbed.

A pause ensued, in which no sound was heard except-

ing the call of some glancing bird, and the gurgle of a neighboring brook; and then, regarding her younger brother wistfully, Phyloprase spoke.

"Alas, dear brother," she said, "your task is indeed heavy, and our hearts are sorrowful, thinking of you. We cannot persuade ourselves to discourage you, though we fain would keep you with us, and not let you go. All things seem mysterious to us, since ever you left our loving shelter. Tell us, Carmyhl,—what reasons kept you from us so long? Have you been sick,—or in danger?"

"Neither. And yet, my soul is sick. Nevertheless, I will be patient, for I am assured of victory; though I wait, I am ever seeking, and will not be dismayed.

"But do not ask me more. I long to come to you, and to embrace all my brothers and sisters; to receive our father's and our mother's blessing; to remain with you all, evermore, not to part from you again.

"And so it shall be, when my quest is finished, and my hope is crowned."

Movis seemed much impressed by the earnestness of conviction which his brother's words evinced; he was grave and silent, and in the pause which followed, lost himself in retrospection. Finally, looking up, he said:

"Dear brother, the memory of past days only serves to strengthen a belief which I have long entertained;—a belief, that the soul of a man needs something more to feed upon than empty ceremonies, and the vagaries of mind engendered by the glamour of a golden image. For this reason, I confess, my hopes have come to cluster in the promises of your nativity; and, step by step, my thoughts have approached more closely to the phases of that wondrous prophecy. I already dream; and, dreaming, behold your triumph."

"Your dreams shall be realised, Movis," Carmyhl re-

plied; "but the time may not be fixed, nor the hour named, for their fulfillment.—But see; the evening draws on, and you have not yet completed your survey."

Movis and Phyloprase now exchanged glances, when the latter said with some hesitancy:

"Dear Carmyhl, we perceive that you are wholly ignorant of the things which have happened in the city and in many of the neighboring provinces. It will grieve us to tell, and distress you to listen; nevertheless, do not take it ill if we enlighten you,—and, for all our sakes, I pray you to be calm."

"Our father,—our mother?" he faltered, with a quick emotion; "they are not—they are not—"

"No, Carmyhl, all of us are well, and only waiting for your return to enjoy a perfect happiness."

"Then what is amiss?—what has happened, to cause your face to sadden? It is true, that I know little of what has occurred in this part of the kingdom, for I have been on the thither side of Sariphi; and have wandered far through the mountains. In a cave of the mountains I have slept,—and dreamed."

"And yet I cannot tell you," said Phyloprase, looking away from him, while her eyes became suffused with tears.

"Dear brother," said Movis, "it shall be my miserable task to impart to you what cannot fail to cause you a poignant sadness. We know what your mission is, and we believe that there is something wonderful in store for us when you find the object of your quest. In the meanwhile, however, the people are like restless and headstrong children broken out of bounds.

"For no sooner had they recovered from the more serious effects of the shock attending their own uprising against the infamy of the priests, than they all, as with

one accord, began to clamor for the vanished Pallahmyhl.

"They searched for him with an earnestness which amounted to a frenzy. They searched long, but in vain. They called, but he did not answer. It was as though the earth had swallowed him; or, as many of them believed, as though he had flown to heaven on the night of the storm, there to rest a while from his labors."

"But Movis!" exclaimed Carmyhl; "it was well understood by all the leaders of the Imaus, that he was gone upon a journey of the utmost importance; that he would soon return and resume the guidance of their interests; that they should wait and be patient a little longer, now that the beginning had been so well achieved."

"The mystical leader should have tarried a while, after the great victory," said Movis; "because in leaving them so abruptly, he left the way open to all sorts of fantastic conjecture. They were like children, as I said, and acted accordingly.

"They made a great idol of brass, and adorned it with jewels, and set it up in one of the temples which they had restored and beautified for the purpose; and they fell upon their faces before it, and worshipped it in all sincerity.

"The idol was the image of Pallahmyhl."

"Oh,—oh," cried Carmyhl, turning pale; "—it cannot be, my brother,—it cannot be, it cannot be!"

"And yet, 'tis so. The image of Pallahmyhl is even now the idol of as great a concourse as ever swarmed on the steps of Belus.

"But listen further: Our brother Shoza was filled with rage and grief, and was almost the cause of precipitating another carnage. He appealed to the sages, to the learned teachers,—to the king himself. But neither the sages, nor

the teachers, nor the king, could be prevailed upon to use their powers for the staying of the new idolatry.

" 'What!' they said; 'Shall we deny ourselves the possession of a god whose image speaks to us with a tongue of fire?—a god, indeed, whose divinity we know, and whose glory our eyes have beheld?' "

"Alas! Alas!" said Carmyhl, bitterly.

"And so the appeal of Shoza was made in vain," continued Movis; "the powers around the throne are greater than the king's will, and so the smoke of the incense of the altars continues to eclipse the sunlight of reason."

"And yet, dear Carmyhl," said Phyloprase, much moved by her brother's evident distress, "if you will consider but a moment, you will acknowledge that the people are excusable, even if they are not to be commended for the course they have pursued;—and many, indeed, doubt the wisdom of the authorities in giving way to the passion of the multitude.

"Nevertheless, since we must have a god to worship, who is so fit for that exalted position as the being who swept away our oppressors?—who doubtless came from heaven for that purpose, and has returned to heaven, from whence to watch over and protect us.

"It is therefore meet that we should have his sacred image before us, not only for a reminder, but for the satisfying of the heart through the eyes."

"Phyloprase still clings to the old way," said Movis; "and it remains for you, dear Carmyhl, to hasten the illumination of her mind by bringing to us the evidence of that perfect and only god, whose name and place you seek. In that day, we shall bless you, and all the people shall praise you.

"Notwithstanding all which, however, I confess with humility that the glamour of the puissant leader of the

Imaus has almost been too great for my own resistance. Pallahmyhl!—why, this is a god whom we can all most clearly understand; a god of whom we may be proud, and justly so."

"Dear brother," said Carmyhl, "—and you, dear sister, —I pray you, tell me this: Who was Pallahmyhl, that he should have been made into a god, and worshipped?"

They considered a moment, but were obliged to confess that they did not know.

"You ask us a riddle, brother," said Movis; "but the sum of our knowledge is compassed in the interpretation of his name, which interpretation is in itself, mysterious and unsatisfying: *'The Breaker of the Seals.'* This is all we know of him; albeit the wise men declare that he was the emissary of omnipotence, as well as the forerunner of his own glorification."

"The wise men are fools," said Carmyhl; "and their conjectures folly. Pallahmyhl was a preacher who sought to revive hope in the breasts of the despairing; and when the way was made clear, he led them on to victory. But believe me, no word has ever fallen from the lips of Pallahmyl which could be made to wear the covered meaning of a hypocrite."

"You must have known him well, Carmyhl," said Movis, "since you were closely allied with him, and with the other leaders of the Imaus."

"As well as I know myself, brother."

"And you can tell us whence he came?"

"Yes; he came from the mountains."

"And do you know whither he went?"

"Dear brother and sister," he answered, as a strange pallor swept over his face,—*he stands before you.*"

Movis and Phyloprase were greatly startled on hearing these words from their brother, and regarded him stead-

fastly for a space without uttering a syllable; they thought they had heard imperfectly, yet what they fancied they had heard, made them dumb.

"'Tis meet that you should know it," said Carmyhl, gently, "before I go away. The days are drawing close, and I watch from hour to hour for the sign that shall guide me hence.—And when you return to the city, Movis, tell Shoza that I thank him because he has respected my secret. Shoza knew me, even from the beginning."

Movis found his tongue, but his voice was unsteady.

"But,—Carmyhl!" he said; "What is this? What have you said to us?—We are bewildered."

"In finding that your brother Carmyhl is no longer Carmyhl?"

"Dear brother," said Phyloprase, laying one hand on his shoulder, and looking in his eyes while her face paled and she trembled visibly;—"tell us again, what you said; —was it—was it that you,—and the preacher,—are the same?"

"Yes;—I AM PALLAHMYL."

CHAPTER XX

THE revelation made by Carmyhl to his brother and sister was so utterly unexpected, so astonishing in its character, and withal presented to their vision such an extraordinary picture of duality, that they were amazed and perplexed to a degree which rendered them speechless; and though they were fain to believe, because they loved him, they could not, for a while at least, banish their doubts.

It was true, nevertheless.

From the time of his going forth from the cavern of the White Vultures, Carmyhl had been associated with the secret councils of that far reaching, yet little known, sect, which had its origin in the mountains of the Imaus, and from that circumstance was called by the same name; and the fervency of his enthusiasm in the glorious mission to which the prophecy of old had ordained him, had been so marked,—so irresistible, indeed,—that he was made their leader before a month had elapsed.

Carmyhl and Pallahmyhl were one and the same;—first, Carmyhl, whose mind was ever prone to things celestial, beautiful, and ennobling; then Phral, awakened out of dreams to fulfill an august destiny; then Pallahmyl, the breaker of the seals.

The seal on the flood gates which held back the waters of truth was broken,—but not removed; the seal which had closed the doors of mystery and guarded from the knowledge of men abhorrent things, was broken,—but not removed; the seal upon the gates of hell, where in-

iquity rioted and defied assault, was broken,—but not removed.

The seals were broken,—yet not all;—and the river of truth was already drying up.

The prophecy was in course of fulfillment; the name and identity of Carmyhl were swallowed up in the name of Pallahmyhl.

As he stood in the glow of the sunset, the hearts of his brother and sister went out to him, and they embraced him, weeping.

"We, and all of us," they said, "will stand with you, and believe with you, and in you, from now, onward in all sincerity; and will wait for you, and welcome you when you come to us with that divine treasure which shall open our eyes and satisfy our souls."

And they said,—"Our brother,—Pallahmyhl."

"Yes," he answered, "call me by the name which heaven has vouchsafed. For surely, though the truth be hidden as yet, heaven will soon reveal it; and when the seals are all removed, the river of life shall flow freely."

They were all deeply affected by the result of their meeting so unexpectedly amidst the ruins of their former home, and Phyloprase was especially perturbed because of the miserable doubts she had harboured so long.

Besides, this was to be a parting for a long while; perhaps,—they could not tell,—perhaps forever.

The grief of such a separation was too great to permit of anything like an examination of the demesne, and Movis gave up the thought of it, purposing to come again upon the morrow.

As the sun went down, they parted.

The boat glided away down the river, Movis and Phyloprase keeping their tear-dimmed eyes upon the lonely

figure of their brother, and waving their hands to him as long as he was visible.

Pallahmyl returned slowly to the upper part of the garden meadow, and leaned meditatively on the crumbled altar of the fallen Isyl.

As he stood, the face of the idol stared up at him from the thronging weeds, as though in derision and mockery of his unfulfilled desire. Its body lay bent and broken at a little distance, but the position of the head was such as to impart to it something of a grim intelligence, which was both whimsical and exasperating.

He took up a large fragment of stone and threw it down upon the grinning visage, crushing it into the earth.

As the stone fell, a black snake writhed from beneath it, hissing. Pallahmyhl put his foot upon it instantly, and cut it in twain with his dagger.

It was an augury of good; for so should a greater serpent perish.

The new moon hung like a fair pearl in the golden light of the sunset, then was veiled, and night drew swiftly on, and the sky was gemmed with stars.

In a bush of the hedgerow, a nightingale began to sing, and as the cool breeze of the evening came sighing up from the river, the melody grew in volume and sweetness. The shadows crept out from every copse and brake, the dew began to fall, the odors of the wild flowers clung to the zephyr's wings, and ultimate darkness shrouded all the landscape.

Pallahmyhl was deeply troubled in his mind, for he was now like a little child alone in a desert, not knowing which way to turn. His thoughts were slowly gliding into a wilderness illimitable, and ere long they baffled all guidance.

He strove to formulate some plan for the morrow's fol-

lowing, but could not. He looked up to the stars wistfully, and longed to call upon those brighter orbs with whose early acquaintance the pleasure of his days had been closely interwoven; they seemed endowed with a strange vitality; they glanced and sparkled in the unreachable space of heaven like spirits willing to be invoked, and ready to respond with sympathy.

And yet, though beautiful, and bright, and infinitely removed from the grosser things of earth, they made no impress on his soul, and his lips were not parted in response to any vivid message which came from them.

He sat long; but at midnight he arose, and groping his way slowly and wearily towards that portion of the ruins where a sheltered alcove had escaped from utter destruction, he lay down upon a broad slab of stone, and with his robe for a pillow, fell gradually asleep.

His sleep was restless, and many times he awoke and wished for the morrow.

Finally that uneasiness passed away, and a deep slumber fell upon him; he slept profoundly.

It was nearly daybreak when he awoke. At first, he was confused, and uncertain of his whereabouts; but gradually remembering, he sighed, and looking up to the sky—

Ah,—what beautiful star was that?

A star of the first magnitude, and one with which he was unfamiliar, shone like a flashing diamond in the midst of lesser stars, a degree or more westward of the zenith.

It differed from the others in that it was larger and brighter than they; but the most marvelous thing about it was, it was as white as snow.

Pallahmyhl sprang up, trembling.

"At last! At last!" he cried; "A sign,—a messenger! Oh, welcome star, descend, and give me knowledge!

Guide me, thou heavenly light,—speak to my heart the words I long to hear!"

He was all at once in an ecstasy of expectation, and the blood coursed swiftly through his veins; the throbbing of his heart was accelerated, and sounded in his ears like the beating of a drum. He looked steadfastly upward, thrilled with a consciousness of being near to the mystery of another world.

As he gazed, the star increased in size and brilliancy.

It was descending!

In a moment, it was as large and bright as the sun itself, and the whiteness of it was appalling.

Pallahmyhl fell back upon the stone slab, dazed, blinded, reft of motion, by the wondrous effulgence of the dread visitant coming to overwhelm him in its terrible glory.

His breath was suspended, and his soul was in a tumult.

Time and space fled from the palsied grasp of memory; the raging blood in his veins began to freeze;—or—

Was he dead?

Had he already left his body on the chilling stone, and come at a leap into that other world?

But he felt no touch of the falling meteor, though it had surely fallen;—no wind from the fanning of its swift descent, yet it had fallen;—and heard no sound of the rush and the thunder of its lightning plunge, though it had fallen, indeed.

He felt like one immersed in water, yet he breathed, and was conscious; he dared not open his eyes, nor did he dare to move,—if, indeed, his quivering soul was still housed in its body, and could make that body responsive to its will.

Another moment passed. He breathed, in very truth; he was not dead.

Another moment;—when, wonderful! his agitation subsided, the beating of his heart grew less and less strenuous,

the weight of mortal terror was lifted from his bosom, and his soul was calm again.

The descent of the star had been the sign of his acceptance.

It may have been a little, or a greater, while; he could not tell;—it was not long, however, because the night was still unbroken; and he arose.

He stood up, bewildered at the moment of opening his eyes, but instantly afterward fully possessed of all his faculties.

The light had vanished;—had he, in very reality, seen that light?—that wondrous star?

For a while, he dared not turn his eyes to heaven; but, being moved by an irresistible impulse, he conquered his timidity and looked.

The white star was glittering in the sky!

It was real;—a wonder of the heavens.

As Pallahmyhl looked upon it, the star began to move from the place where it had first appeared; not slowly, in unison with the movement of the spheres, but as a planet severed from the constellations and endowed with some inscrutable intelligence. Its course was westward from the zenith.

As it swept majestically through the concourse of the twinkling stars, Pallahmyhl's heart gave a great bound.

The way to his bourne was shown!

He understood!

His ecstasy and thankfulness choked him, and the tears streamed from his eyes. He sank upon his knees, still with his blinded eyes fixed on the glorious orb.

"Thou leadest me!" he cried; 'Thou showest me the path to that longed-for place where the very god, the infinite, the omniscient, abides in holiness! Oh, thou mes-

senger of mercy, I thank thee!—and will follow thee whithersoever thy light shall guide my feet."

While he yet looked through the rain of his tears, the star was in its former place again; without a visible retrocession, it was there,—a beautiful, bright star, only differing from the other planets by its greater brilliancy, and the whiteness of its splendor; a wonder in the high heavens, a star apart; and it now moved with a slow and stately grandeur,—with the movement of the constellations.

The air was redolent of a subtle perfume like the breath of eglantine; the breeze of the morning fanned the dew-laden foliage; the lesser stars began to pale before the coming of the dawn.

Hark!—a sound of music?

Was that the nightingale, in a meadow far away?

But hark;—whence came that faint, yet deeply thrilling melody?—like the voices of aeolian harps in a southern breeze; like the silver bells of falling waters, where the cedars rustle; like—

Ah,—that was not earthly music.

It came from heaven! It descended from the star of promise!

It was celestial melody, indeed;—for the angels winging from the throne of God were singing to His messenger, the STAR OF BETHLEHEM.

CHAPTER XXI

It was the hour of sunset in the land of Judah.

In a field overgrown with flowers and vine-encumbered weeds,—a fallow field, skirted upon one side by an impetuous shallow stream,—a small company of men were resting.

Their countenances showed them to be men of various and widely differing nationalities, and their garments were fashioned accordingly; the diversity of their attire imparted to each a peculiar and distinctive air, and gave to all of them, as they were thus intermingled, an appearance of barbaric splendor which was in the highest degree picturesque and impressive.

They were travel-stained; and some of them were gaunt, and hollow-eyed.

But though travel-stained, they were not so from any stress of poverty, being persons of substance in their own countries; neither, albeit careworn and anxious, were they so from an inability to command attendants.

They were pilgrims from the uttermost regions of the East;—from Magog, and Ophir, and the lands of the Chaldeans.

Some of them were rulers over principalities; some of them were princes who had resigned their heritage; some of them were scholars; and there were merchants amongst them, and men subtle in handicraft;—a motley assemblage.

They had met, as it were, by chance, at different stages of what had been for the greater number of them a year's

journey; and were actuated by a cogent motive which they all shared alike.

The motive was to find the promised god who was to supersede all other gods; to find that veritable god, of whose advent they had all been advised by visions and strange premonitions; to find the king and lord of all the earth, into whose presence they were each and every one of them being guided by day and by night by a wonderful star in the sky.

In visions, indeed, they had first received knowledge of Him whose birth was imminent in the far off land of Judah; and to Him, the Holy One, they journeyed unfaltering, eager to present their precious gifts, and impatient to fall down in worship.

They had passed through many and severe vicissitudes; and had been in danger from robbers and wild beasts, from exorbitant tribute to wandering tribes, and from the vagaries of weather.

From the land of Magog, beyond the mountains, came Myrva-Lai, a governor of wide provinces, whose heart had been wrenched by the iniquities of his idolatrous people; he was the first, his country being the most remote.

He came into Ophir, and there met Klas, one of the princes of the royal house; and they joined themselves together, and were led by the guiding star through the shadowy defiles of lonely mountains, until they came to the beautiful and garden-like region of the Chaldeans, in Ur, where the Paropamissus loomed.

These two had crossed the terraced heights of Sariphi, and descended to the rich plains extending from the unknown places of the north to the valley of the River of Hesydrus; and in the valley, journeying alone, but radiant with hope, was Pallahmyhl, who gladly joined them.

Coming into Arachosia, in the land of Cush, they had

met with Ghamarad, a student who had abandoned the teachings of the patriarchs, and set his soul on a more exalting theme than any they were capable of discoursing.

From Cush, they had come into Elam, the country of the Persians, fire-worshippers, and followers after gods of luxury; and were joined there by Rhodas, a prince over tributary dominions, who also had been called from despair by the potent influence of the radiant star.

They had passed through Shinar and Babylonia, being joined as they went, by Chal-Phar, and Armas,—the first from Mesopotamia, and the second from Shushan;—and had come to the plains of Dura, and the terrible desert of sand beyond them.

The journey through the desert had been made upon camels, but the burning heat, and the numberless deprivations to which they had been subjected, had been only endurable because of the gracious encouragement vouchsafed them by the ever present star.

To the varied company of the large caravan to which they had joined themselves, the star seemed but the familiar planet they had always known; but to the pilgrims, it was revealed each night in all the eloquence of its sacred meaning;—a living messenger and guide.

And so they had reached the country of the Jordan; and to-morrow would enter the Wilderness of Judah.

The field wherein they rested, was near to Bethabara, on the bank of the river Jordan.

Great masses of stone, white and lichen covered, were strewn over it, and as they sat or reclined on the rocky ledges, they were refreshed and charmed by the beauty of the wild flowers, the perfume and loveliness of the oleanders, and the cooling shadow-depths of the vine entangled osiers.

"Our journey is nearly finished," said Ghamarad, the Arachosian, addressing his companions;—he was learned in the history of the Jews, and had beguiled the way with fragments of his knowledge;—"and in a few days more, we shall behold the Messiah, the Son of God."

"And will He show us the Father?" asked Pallahmyhl.

"He and the Father are one;—have you not by this time comprehended?"

"Tell us again, wise sir,—the tale is so wonderful that our hearts falter, lest we have understood it too brightly," said Myrva-Lai,—he who had come from the land of Magog.

"Once again," pleaded the others; and Pallahmyhl drew nearer and hung upon the words of the venerable student.

"In our multitudinous pantheon," said Ghamarad, in kindly acquiescence repeating again what he had told them many times before, "are gods of high, and low, and middle degree; gods of varying qualities, and of diverse attributes. For, every nation and tribe hath its own peculiar divinity; every family hath its divinity; every man, indeed, is possessed of a god which is his own particular and personal property, guide, and arbiter.

"Now the true God,—but listen to the very words of the true God, as they were given to a holy prophet ages and ages ago;—as I have learned from the wise men of this favored country;—a prophet whose name was Moses; who was called up into the highmost part of Mount Sinai, and received there from the hands of God this message": and he recited to the rapt and eager listeners the Ten Commandments.

The impression made by the recital upon the company was most profound; and they showed in the expression of their faces a full and glad appreciation of the grandeur and wisdom of the divine ordinance.

THE DESCENT OF THE STAR.—*Chapter* 20.

Ghamarad, continuing, said:

"Before the earth was; before the sun, and the moon, and the stars, existed; before ever the blue sky encircled them;—before time was;—this God, inscrutable, immutable, lived, the source and inception of all things.

"God was the beginning, and the everlasting. As He was then, He is now, and will always be."

"And His image, Ghamarad," interrupted Myrva-Lai, the Magog; "what is it like? Shall we see it with our very eyes when the star descends?"

"No man has ever looked upon God in His glory," answered the student; "but the first man and woman, whom He created out of the ground, were blessed by His companionship in the spirit,—as it were an angel walking with them in the Garden of Paradise.

"He created the heavens and the earth, and all the things therein, in six days, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore the seventh day is accounted holy by this chosen people, and is so observed to this hour.

"On the sixth day, He made a man from the dust of the ground; and made a woman also, to be the man's companion; and rested on the seventh day, because all His work was finished.

"Now, at the time of the creation, there was good, and evil; but whether good and evil were co-existent in the beginning, I know not.

"But the evil spirit, which had been cast out of Heaven, but not destroyed, caused the man and woman to flagrantly disobey the Good Spirit, which was God, the Creator and Lord of all things.

"It was because of this disobedience that sin and sorrow came into the world; for until then, the purity and innocence of every creature were assured and unassailable, and happiness had no counterpart of grief.

"And because of this disobedience, the man and woman were sent out of Paradise; and the curse of mutability was put upon them and their descendants, and the elements were warped to make them feel the necessity of labor;—but whether attributes were taken from, or added to, the parents of men when they had so fallen, no man knows.

"After that, men increased on the earth, and were inconstant to the God who had made them;—at times they worshipped Him, and at other times they made idols of stone and brass, and bowed down before them.

"Ultimately, they wandered so far in wickedness that the whole world was drowned in a flood of waters which destroyed all, except a chosen few who were saved in an ark."

"And so the world was really drowned?" said Klas, the prince of Ophir; "I have heard the legend, but could not understand it.—Wonderful!"

"When the waters subsided," proceeded Ghamarad, "the family of men, and all the creatures with them in the ark, came down from the mountain of Ararat—"

"I have heard of a shrine on Ararat," interrupted Chal-Phar, the Mesopotamian, with sparkling eyes; "where the god of the waters made his abode, sending down torrents, and shaking the rain clouds.—Wonderful!"

"The remnant of men," continued Ghamarad, "left the ark, and began to multiply. In a while, the earth was peopled again, and the people were just as inconstant and variable towards their Creator as before;—but the great God had promised not to destroy them again.

"And so the ages passed. Men were given opportunities, again, and again, and again, to rule, and save, and bless themselves; to indulge the uttermost of their powers;

to destroy the evil which was inherent in them; and to remove the curse which weighed upon them.

"But since of necessity they warred with their own nature, they lost advantage more and more; and became luxuriously corrupt and vile, worshipping strange and terrible gods,—gods set up by their own hands, and glorified with fictitious honors.

"They were so fallen, in despite of reason, in despite of knowledge;—for they were constantly receiving the essential truth from the only living God, through the lips of His prophets.

"But they scorned the prophets; and spurned the truth.

"So is the world to-day,—lost, and debased.

"Now this God whom we seek, loved the children of His creation, and His heart yearned towards them in their helplessness.

"From this divine love, comes the marvel of our quest, the crowning glory of time.

"This very God will cause a child to be born of a virgin in the land of Judah,—in Bethlehem-Ephrata,—whither we go to meet Him.

"The child will be the Holy Spirit incarnate; and will take away the sins of the world, and reconcile men to their Creator.

" 'Tis Him, we seek;—Him, we shall worship."

"How beautiful is this revelation!" exclaimed Pallah-myhl; "From the very beginning of it, we see the veil torn from the mystery of creation; and know indeed that we are in the hands of the Almighty God, who alone could show us who we are, and whence we came. And His love for us, Ghamarad,—wonderful!"

"Wonderful!" echoed Myrva-Lai.

"Wonderful!" said all the pilgrims.

"And is this child that Son of God of whom the prophets spoke?" asked Pallahmyhl.

"Yes. The living God is the unseen God; Who, because of His love for us, will become incarnate, as I have said."

"And by what name shall we call Him?"

"He is called the Messiah; the Christ; and His name is Jesus."

"Hark!" said Armas, suddenly; "I hear a sound of music in the air; let us rise and go forward, lest we be late at the star's descending."

They listened intently, and there seemed, indeed, to be a melodious whispering in the atmosphere, but it was so faint, and far away, that they could not comprehend it.

The sun had now gone down, and the brief twilight was fading. In the sky, above their heads, the beautiful white star was shining with all its pristine lustre, and they watched it with an anxious wistfulness.

All at once, a thrill passed through them;—the star was stationary!

It had come to the end of its course; it was shining over Bethlehem.

They sprang to their feet, trembling, yet quickened with a newer energy; and with one accord set forward again in the direction they had been following all the day.

The way out of the field led them into a glen so deeply shadowed and canopied with trees that they could scarce discern the nature of the ground they walked upon, and the brambles confused and impeded them distractingly.

They were dumb, from a sense of their nearness to the goal of their fateful journey; each one of them was burning with a passionate eagerness to be the first; each one of them pressed forward as if from the close pursuit of some malignant monster.

After strenuous exertions, and many escapes from the clutches of the thorns, they emerged at last from the dismal labyrinth, into an open space at the edge of a precipitous descent; the sky was clearly visible.

"Behold!" cried Pallahmyhl, who was in the van of the pilgrims; "The time is near! Ah, God, Thou comest!"

And looking, they perceived a great light radiating from the star in every direction, and a white stream of light descending from it to the earth like a rivulet of molten silver.

It was far away; a day's journey; perhaps two days' journey;—they could not tell.

They fell upon their knees, and wept; their hearts were strained within them.

In a while, the stress of their excitement was calmed, and the bitterness of their grief at being yet so far away, was assuaged; and they searched for a path leading downwards.

They went about, through a narrow cleft in the towering rocks, and with exceeding care groped their way from the precipice, down through a copse of wildwood; then crossed an uneven space rank with osiers; and climbed a grassy hill, coming at last into a broad, clear field, wherein were several shepherds, watching their flocks, and marveling greatly at the wondrous light in the sky.

"Sirs!" they cried, on beholding the approaching pilgrims; "The Messiah comes! Behold His light in the heavens!"

Before an answer could be made, a wave of celestial music swept through the sky, and quivering, as though agitated by a breeze, returned again into the infinite distance whence it came. The light of the star increased to a great glory, and the shepherds, frightened, fell upon their faces.

"Oh, let us hasten!" said Pallahmyhl to his companions, who were almost overcome by the sight.

Ghamarad, mastering the intensity of his emotions, at once followed Pallahmyhl's lead with the others, saying to them as they ran, "The hour is come. The Son of God is born this moment, and our feet are laggard in the way."

They strove through the open fields, forded numberless brooks without a moment's hesitation, clambered over the hills, and plunged through opposing thickets; and still the glory shone upon them, and the slender rivulet of light which emanated from the star, held steadily from heaven to earth in the vast distance beyond.

All at once they stopped, looking at each other with radiant faces; the music of the spheres had come again.

But ah, diviner music still! Hark!—those were surely voices? They were voices, indeed, thrilling the night.

Voices, not of the earth, but of heaven.

They were the voices of angels.

And as they looked, and listened, they beheld spirits of light, in the light,—multitudes of the angels of the Lord, —white and shining in the sky.

They fell upon their knees.

Oh, oh, the ineffable music of the angel voices!

Oh, oh, the glimpse of the glory of the Lord God of heaven and earth!

Trembling souls, be still. Quivering hearts, be still!

The pilgrims fell upon their faces, worshipping.

Then came, silver-clear, words in the music of the heavenly choir; the hearts of the pilgrims leaped within them, and Pallahmyhl was in an ecstasy of tears.

So great was their perturbation, they caught but a portion of the burden of the song; but it was the vital portion, the supreme, and all-inclusive:

—Unto you is born this day,
In the City of David,
A Saviour,
Which is Christ, the Lord.

And again:

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace,
Good will toward men.

. . . . . .

At the end of the next day, the pilgrims were in the Wilderness; and on the day following went around about the city of Jerusalem, and found themselves in a charming country where the fig trees grew luxuriantly, and magnificent olives fringed the terraced slopes of gently undulating hills.

Here, from sheer fatigue, they were fain to rest a while.

To the eastward, a glimpse of the Dead Sea was had, through the trees upon the hills; and before them, crowning a beautiful height, was the City of David,—Bethlehem.

While they rested, impatient of their weariness, yet made perforce to yield for a while to its importunities, there approached a company of wise men, who stopped a moment to speak with them.

"Whence come you?" asked one.

"From the ends of the earth," answered Myrva-Lai.

"We, also, come from afar. Have you heard, perhaps, of the child Jesus, who was to be born of a virgin in this country?"

"The Son of God is born, and lies in Bethlehem, yonder; we go presently to worship Him."

"Receive our thanks," said the wise man; "the tidings you give us are such as we have waited and longed for;

we were led hither by the flaming star. See:—we bring gifts, to lay at the feet of the Lord."

He and his companions showed how they had with them exquisite golden vessels, rare jewels, boxes of pearls, and jeweled vases containing myrrh and frankincense and attar of roses.

The pilgrims, not to be outdone, showed also what they had brought to offer Him whose advent was so wonderful; and then, that one of the wise men who spoke for the rest, said:

"Herod, the king, has commissioned us to find the Holy One, so that he may come also and worship Him. We go now to the Child, to look upon Him with our very eyes, and to worship Him. Afterwards,—but we cannot tell what we shall do afterwards."

They hastened away, and in the same hour of their going, the pilgrims arose and followed them.

They saw where the people were pressing forward in great numbers; the people were coming and going continually.

There was an orchard near by, lying at the foot of a grassy terrace whereon stood an inn, thronged with men, women, and children, restless, and full of a strange excitement.

Beyond the orchard, in an open place surrounded by trees, and threaded by a slender brook, was an assemblage of low roofed buildings,—the granaries and stables belonging to the inn.

At the lower end of these, a large folding door stood open, and the throng about it was dense, though silent, and reverential.

Pallahmyhl pushed his way slowly to the bourne of his long quest;—to the unutterable Presence;—to the holy of holies.

His knees trembled beneath him, and his hands were cold and wet; the blood in his body was cold, and his heart fluttered.

The nearer he approached, the more he trembled; his eyes were burning, though his head seemed frozen; every faculty of his body, every thought of his soul, was under the spell of a wonderful and speechless ecstasy.

In a while, he was close enough to see more plainly the place where the manger was situated, and to mark where the entrance to the stable might be approached more certainly.

A great vine was growing against the wall, and its foliage spread widely upon the flat roof.

Beside the stem of the vine, was a low window; and beside the window, was the door, wide open.

Pallahmyhl ran to the *DOOR*.

THE END

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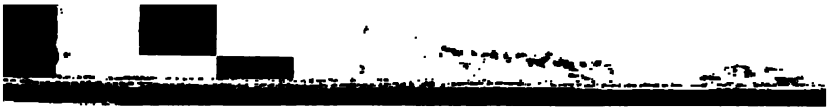

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